

2, 4, 6, & 8

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by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

(Or: You Have *How* Many Siblings?)

Thanksgiving is taken very seriously in the Barton Family (or, rather, between the Barton siblings). Typically James hosts, considering Skyfall manor is the only place large enough to fit them all. However, it was rather recently...blown up. Yeah. Will's apartment is far too small, and John, Aaron, Jason, and Brian have the same problem. William has recently shipped out to Afghanistan, and while none of the Barton clan would be opposed to a vacation in warmer climates, it's not the best backdrop for Thanksgiving dinner.

Clint, on the other hand, has just moved into Stark Tower.

(Or: That One Where the Avengers Get to Meet Clint's Family.)

Note: Chapter four is up but chapter five is just a character masterlist.

Notes

READ NOTE: I almost forgot, but I'll be referring to William Brandt as "Will" and William James as "William", to differentiate between the two.

Also, I haven't actually seen S.W.A.T., and I'll be diverging from cannon rather majorly: Brian did not actually go darkside, but instead was brought in on a covert mission for SHIELD. Brian successfully 'rescued' Montel - only to turn him over to SHIELD. See, SHIELD wanted Montel in their custody, because he held some sensitive information regarding undercover SHIELD operatives, which he threatened to divulge if the US government didn't give him a deal. So, SHIELD decided to bring in an outside operative to 'rescue' Montel and retrieve the records he held. Brian Gamble happened to be in the right place at the right time. Of course, being related to Clint helped. (All of this was later explained to his team - although much of the true nature of the information was withheld.)

This chapter is rather Avengers and MI:4 heavy, though, but the rest will all appear in the upcoming chapters! Again, I know Avengers and Sherlock the best, and I've only seen MI:4, Hurt Locker, Bourne Legacy, and Skyfall once, and I've only seen four Unusuals episodes. So, I hope my characterization is okay!

Also, what little I know about orphanages was gleaned from the skimpy wikipedia article, so sorry for any inaccuracies! The same is true for my knowledge of intellectual disability/MR. And if the ages get a little confusing, these are their ages when they were orphaned:

James (16)

John (14)

Barney (11)

Will/Jason/Aaron/Clint/Brian/William (7)

Edit: I had someone ask why James or John didn't just adopt Barney and Clint when they came of age. It's because when Barney and Clint ran away from the orphanage, James and John were 21 and 19 respectively. For the US, you have to be at least 25 to legally adopt internationally (James and John were living in the UK). Even if they managed to make it so that they went by British law instead of American, the adoption age there is 21, and James would just barely be 21 at the time (Barney and Clint would have run away maybe just a few months before he turned 21).

Edit Two: For some reason my edits for chapter one aren't showing up, so instead I've added the character masterlist as a new chapter (chapter five). If you need any clarification about any of the characters, read it.

There. Now, on to the story! (Sorry it's a day late! I had originally planned on posting on Thanksgiving, but then, well, family happened...)

Chapter 1: Two Brothers

Clint Barton was beginning to regret his offer to host this year's Barton Thanksgiving Dinner. Or, rather, this year's Barton Thanksgiving Week Long Festival, because that's truly what it was. The Barton Clan took this holiday very seriously. Typically James hosted (his eldest brother - James Bond), but, well, considering the way Skyfall Manor had been blown to smithereens a few months prior, that wasn't a viable option. No one else had a large enough house, either - Jason's diner being the only place large enough to even fit them all in for the famous Thanksgiving Dinner. Of course, the one year that Jason had hosted, he insisted on cooking for everyone. Let's just say it did not end well. Jason wasn't a *bad* cook, per say... he just had an interesting idea of what ingredients went well together and what ones didn't.

So, Clint was the only one who had space enough to host, seeing as he'd been living in Stark Tower for the past few months. It's just that... well, he hadn't really gotten a chance to ask Tony if it was okay. Or any of the other Avengers, for that matter. In fact, he hadn't even gotten a chance to tell them about his (very, very large) family. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. Natasha knew, seeing as she'd been his plus one last year.

That was another part of Thanksgiving: everyone was allowed a "plus one." Of course, it hadn't always been like that. Originally, it was a purely family event, a chance for Clint to celebrate with his seven (yes, seven) brothers - a chance for all of them to catch up and keep in touch. It had been John's idea, as all of their family ideas seemed to be. It hadn't even been a real get-together, John had just called all of them on Thanksgiving day to check in and make sure everyone was doing okay.

This was after the car crash, you see. Both their mother and their father had died in a drunk driving accident. Clint hated the word "accident." He never really thought of it as an "accident." His father didn't "accidentally" drink all that alcohol, and he didn't "accidentally" go out for a drive. Maybe he didn't mean to wrap the car around a tree, but Clint had always thought of it as more of a bad decision than an accident. Not really an "on purpose" but certainly not an "accident." (He knew everyone else agreed with him. His brothers, at least.)

Either way, whether "accidentally" or "on purpose," all nine of the Barton boys ended up in an orphanage, with no next of kin in sight. At first Clint thought it might not be so bad, the orphanage. There was no more drinking and no more screaming and everyone had enough to eat. It was just him and his brothers. Clint liked that idea. He liked that idea right up until James, John, and Aaron got taken away. He'd screamed and cried and fought even though he knew it was useless, as the orphanage director tried to explain to him that James and John couldn't stay at the orphanage, that they were going to a different orphanage because they were *teen*-agers.

He knew why Aaron was being taken away, though, and that scared him even more. He'd heard the hushed conversations before with words too big for his seven year old mind to really understand. He didn't need the nurse to explain to him that Aaron was different - he knew that Aaron wasn't very smart. He knew how people looked at Aaron and how Aaron had trouble understanding things. He knew that people called Aaron things like "retard" and "stupid." He also remembered how it made Aaron cry, how James and John had to hold him and tell him that everything was alright, how John had said that he wasn't stupid, just-just sick.

John didn't have an answer when Aaron asked when he was going to get better.

Losing Aaron hurt. Losing John and James hurt. But Clint knew that everything would have hurt much more if John hadn't made the Thanksgiving phone calls. John was nice and smart and it really was no wonder that he got adopted right away, even if he was already fourteen years old. The Watsons were nice people, Clint had actually met them once, long after he was grown up and gone from the orphanage. They had moved to England only a year after adopting John, but the distance didn't feel that large, considering his only contact to John was through the phone anyway. Amazingly, James got adopted too, by another British family. Clint always liked the sound of the name "James Bond."

The hard part, though, was when Will and Jason were adopted. Will and Jason were always the calm ones, the smart ones. They took after John. (Clint never referred to any of his siblings as to taking after his mother or father. It was always John or James.) Maria Walsh was a nice woman, Clint supposed later on, but to his eight year old self, she was the devil incarnate for taking away his brothers.

(When Clint cried to Barney about it later, Barney just snapped at him and said that he'd probably get adopted next, because people liked identical twins. Identical twins were cute and novel. Barney didn't have a twin. Clint wanted to point out that he didn't have a twin, either. Not without Aaron.)

(Clint was right. Brian and William were adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Gamble two years later.)

When Clint was twelve and Barney was sixteen, they were the only ones left. Barney was bitter and angry, but Clint didn't really realize that until much later, and when Barney suggested running away to the circus, Clint naively agreed.

When John's Thanksgiving phone call was met with: "I'm sorry, your brothers are missing" the panic was inevitable and all consuming. When James, now twenty three, and John, now twenty one, finally found fourteen year old Clint, broken and world weary and left by the circus on the side of the road, they swore they'd never let him go again.

That year the Thanksgiving phone calls became Thanksgiving get-togethers. That first time seeing all his brothers together again after being separated for seven years will always be Clint's happiest memory.

(But Barney wasn't there. Barney wasn't invited. Clint doesn't know if this makes him sad or happy.)

For years it was only the eight of them. Clint was happy with that. It wasn't until Aaron joined the army that anything changed. To this day, Clint hates the army recruiter who okayed Aaron's enlistment. They all knew that because of Aaron's mental handicap he shouldn't have been allowed into the army. It was dangerous and stupid and Clint still feels, at least a little bit, like it's his fault. It *is* partially his fault. It's also partially John's fault, and partially Brian's fault. It was their fault because John joined the British army, and Clint joined the US army, and Brian joined the navy SEALs. They should have known that Aaron would try to follow in their footsteps.

That year there were only seven places set at the table. The news that Aaron had been killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq came two weeks earlier. It's the only time Clint ever saw James cry.

A year later, Aaron was back. Aaron was back, completely unscathed, completely healed, *better* than before. No more mental issues. Clint didn't know if it was a miracle or something that would come back to bite them in the ass.

A year later, it came back to bite them in the ass. Despite his newfound enhancement, without the aid of MI6, IMF, and SHIELD working from the shadows, Operation Outcome would be completely shut down. Aaron would be dead. Of course, they also had a certain geneticist friend of Aaron's to thank. That Thanksgiving was the first where someone outside of the brothers attended, but after helping Aaron the way she did, any of Aaron's protective brothers was willing to call Dr. Marta Shearing family.

That was the beginning of the "plus one." Being one of their plus ones was very meaningful, more meaningful than anything else they could offer you, really. It meant you were family.

The number of plus ones was increasing every year, and it warmed Clint's heart. (Not that he'd ever tell anyone that. Everyone was still teasing Brian about asking Jim to 'run away with him' before the Montel mission – he didn't want to turn his brothers' merciless teasing onto him instead.) However, this year was going to be more than just a plus *one*. With the Avengers, he would be bringing in *five* people. Five outsiders. And then there was Phil...

The Avengers were family now, Clint couldn't deny that. They helped him get through the tough time when he'd thought Phil was dead as much as his brothers had. And Phil... Clint honestly didn't know what to do about that whole situation. If Phil was his *boyfriend* then his brothers would *insist* that he attend, but, well, he wasn't. Clint *wanted* him to be, but...

Well, it was complicated. Still, he didn't know how everyone would react to him bringing five extra people into their family. They wouldn't think he was replacing them, would they?

Clint's phone rang.

Clint pulled the StarkPhone he had recently been gifted from his pocket. There were only a few people that had this number: the Avengers, obviously, as Tony had given him the phone, Phil (who was practically an Avenger), and Director Fury. He checked the caller ID, which merely said "unknown" as the phone continued to ring merrily. (Or maybe "marimba" would be a better verb. He still hadn't changed the default ringtone.) Clint raised one eyebrow, but answered the phone anyway.

"Hello, this is Walsh's Diner! Our daily special is scrambled eggs with chocolate chips and hot sauce," Clint chirped with false cheer.

"Clint, stop making fun of Jason. His cooking isn't really that bad," the voice on the other end grumbled exasperatedly.

"Oh, hey Will," Clint replied, blinking. "How'd you get this number? I've only had the phone for two days."

"I work for an intelligence agency, Clint," Will replied, a hint of teasing in his voice. "That and James called me yesterday. He gave me your number."

"Oh."

"I'm actually calling about Thanksgiving Dinner," Will continued.

"Are you trying to bail again?" Clint asked, sounding equal parts annoyed and disappointed. "You know, you have brothers who work for MI6 and SHIELD; we can bully the IMF into giving you some time off if that's what you need."

“No, I’ve already got my vacation time sorted out and I’m not trying to bail,” Will replied (Clint swore that if he could see Will at that moment, he’d be pouting). “It’s actually about the plus one thing.”

Clint blinked in surprise. James and Will were the only two of the eight brothers who’d never brought a plus one before. Was he trying to get out of it, or...?

“Um, well, I was actually wondering if it would be okay if I brought, uh, three people...” Will rambled on (his face was probably bright red right now). “I don’t want to impose or anything, it’s just that, well, it’s kind of impossible to bring one of them without bringing all three of them. Spies, you know? And I can’t really play favorites or anything - ”

“Will, chill,” Clint laughed. “It should be fine. I live in Stark Tower, remember? Space isn’t an issue. Plus, no one will mind if you have a couple extra people over. Consider it making up for all those years that you didn’t bring anyone over. Also, considering all of the other Avengers live in Stark Tower with me, I’ll have, like, plus five people.”

“I’m just being paranoid, aren’t I?” Will asked.

“Yep,” Clint replied merrily, teasing his brother. “The more the merrier. Any friends of yours are friends of ours. Well, unless they’re complete assholes. Thankfully we’ve never had that problem with anyone, although I should probably warn you about Tony. He *is* kind of an asshole, but he’s nice once you get to know him.”

“Oh god, I hadn’t thought of that,” Will said suddenly.

“Hadn’t thought of what?” Clint asked.

“Benji, one of my plus ones, he’s a techie. And a major Stark fan,” Will replied. “And by major, I mean that I would not be at all surprised if he has a shrine to Stark somewhere in his house.”

Clint burst out laughing.

“Oh, come on; it’s not that funny,” Will whined, but Clint detected some hidden mirth in his voice.

“We’ll cross that bridge once we get there, Will,” Clint said, still smiling. “But don’t worry – everything will work out.”

“Last time you said that involved a kitchen fire, a boa constrictor, and a warehouse full of throwing knives,” Will muttered, no longer sounding very amused. “Forgive me if I don’t trust you when you say that.”

“Oh!” Clint exclaimed, remembering something. “Don’t forget to give them the PowerPoint presentation before you come over. We don’t want a repeat of the fire extinguisher episode.”

“Don’t forget that I *made* that PowerPoint,” Will said.

“I took some pictures!” Clint protested.

“Which I didn’t include because I don’t want my friends’ first impression of James to be an upside-down picture of him swinging a singed copy of *And Then There Were None* at Brian’s head,” Will replied, rolling his eyes.

“What about the one of you and Jason asleep on the couch together? That one’s pretty cute,” Clint teased. “But I suppose you wouldn’t want to give your friends a heart attack – they’d probably die of the shock of seeing you in a hoodie.”

“You’re right – I’d never live it down,” Will said dryly, although Clint detected a hint of truth in his voice. “Anyway, I’d better go – Ethan’s about to do something stupid again.”

“Have fun, bro,” Clint replied, his voice warm despite its slightly mocking edge. “See you in, what, three days, then?”

“See you.”

Clint hung up. His bright mood subsided slightly as he remembered how he still needed to talk to the rest of the team about hosting the event. He supposed he should call a team meeting or something. As much as he teased Will about his meticulously organized PowerPoint he really didn’t want a repeat of the fire extinguisher incident. It really was mainly his fault, considering it was the first Thanksgiving he’d invited Natasha to. She was the reason the fire extinguisher ended up being wielded as a lethal weapon. Yeah. No one wanted a repeat performance of *that*.

Time to assemble the Avengers.

If William Brandt had been the type to chew his nails as a nervous habit, he’d currently have none left. As it was, he was a trained agent of the Impossible Missions Force. There was nothing in his body language to even hint at how nervous he was.

“Brandt, why is your eye twitching?” Ethan asked, quirked an eyebrow at his teammate. “I told you I was going to jump off that building. I can never understand why you get so worked up about these things...”

“It’s not so much the jumping off the building part as the keeping track of you *after* you’ve jumped off the building part,” he replied dryly, going with Ethan’s explanation for his twitchiness.

In reality, his anxiety was due to the subject of the phone call he’d just made to his brother. He’d gotten the okay from Clint about bringing all three of his team members over to Stark Tower for their Thanksgiving celebration, but he hadn’t exactly asked Ethan, Benji, and Jane if they’d be willing to attend yet. Will wasn’t sure how to go about all of it. He considered them his closest friends (besides his brothers, of course) even though they’d only been a team for a little over a year.

Will wondered if maybe he should just forego asking and tell Clint that they couldn’t come. That was a really bad idea, though, because if there was anyone who could see through him, it was his brother. Clint would end up inviting Ethan, Benji, and Jane over himself and then things would just get awkward and Will would end up feeling guilty.

Well, here goes nothing.

“Hey, Ethan,” Will started, shoving his hands inside his pockets to keep from fiddling with anything.

“Yeah?” Ethan replied, curiosity in his expression.

“I was just wondering if you’re doing anything next week. You know, for Thanksgiving,” Will continued, feeling his cheeks grow slightly warmer as he blushed, embarrassed when Ethan gave him a questioning look.

“Thanksgiving?” Ethan asked. “I didn’t realize that was next week. Why, do you have a secret passion for cooking or something?”

“What? No!” Will sputtered as Ethan grinned at him. “It’s just that Thanksgiving is kind of a big deal in my family and we always have a major get-together. My brother Clint’s hosting this year and he and my other brothers have been badgering me about how I never invite anybody over, so I was wondering if maybe you, Benji, and Jane would like to come with.”

“Sure,” Ethan replied, sounding pleasantly surprised by Will’s offer. “I haven’t had a family dinner like that since Julia.”

Will’s mood fell, guilt creeping over him, despite the fact that he’d know for over a year that Julia hadn’t actually died. His eyes flickered over to Ethan’s face to evaluate Ethan’s expression, and was met with an ‘oh shit’ look.

“I didn’t mean…” Ethan started, a guilty expression taking over his previous one.

“I know,” Will interrupted. “I hope this Thanksgiving will be as good as your previous ones with Julia.”

“Oh, I’m certain it will be, as long as one of your relatives can boil water without burning it,” Ethan replied, a smile tugging at his lips. “Julia wasn’t a very good cook, and I’m afraid I’m not much better at it.”

“Don’t put too much faith in us,” Will said, also smiling now. “When I say ‘relatives’ what I really mean is ‘seven brothers.’”

“*Seven?*” Ethan repeated, surprised. “I didn’t think that people had families that big anymore.”

“I’ll show you the PowerPoint later,” Will replied.

Ethan opened his mouth to say something, but Jane and Benji chose that moment to walk into their base of operations, set up in the hotel room.

“Hey, guys, Will was wondering if we’d like to come with him to visit his brothers for Thanksgiving,” Ethan said right away. “I don’t believe we have any missions coming up.”

“I’ve already logged my vacation time,” Will interjected, “and I’m sure that all of you have enough vacation time stored up, also. If you’d like to come, that is.”

Will found himself blushing again, wishing that he was more personable, like John or Brian. He really should have asked them sooner, at least a month sooner, but he hadn’t really been thinking about it much due to his abrupt return to field work. Thinking of that, he hadn’t even gotten around to telling any of his brothers that he was no longer sitting behind a desk as an analyst. He really should have planned better...

“Sure,” Jane said, breaking Will out of his thoughts. “A break would be nice. I think we deserve a bit of time off after all of the world saving that we’ve been doing. Plus,” she said, a mischievous

smile on her face, “this way we can get some insight into your gooey marshmallow center, Will.”

“Oh god, I better keep her away from Clint. And Brian. And Jason. And William,” Will thought. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea...”

“Hey, everyone, British guy here,” Benji interrupted. “What’s ‘Thanksgiving’?”

“It’s a holiday celebrated primarily in the United States and Canada,” Will replied automatically. “It was formerly a Christian holiday, but today it’s mostly treated as secular. Typically it’s celebrated by spending time with extended family and eating food. Turkey is usually the main dish associated with the holiday.”

“So, basically you just talk to people and eat food,” Benji summarized. “Sounds fun. When is it, then?”

“Next Thursday, but with my family it’s typically a week long event, so we’d leave on Sunday,” Will replied. “It’s really the only time my brothers and I get to see each other, so...”

“We won’t be intruding will we?” Jane asked courteously. “Because if you just want some quality time with your relatives we can always find something else to do.”

“No, I want you guys to come,” Will said quickly, perhaps a little too quickly, causing him to feel a little embarrassed. “I love my brothers, and there will probably be a *ton* of inside jokes you won’t get, but it’s kind of nice to have some non-family members around, too. Plus, you guys are...you guys are my friends and therefore you’ll probably end up meeting my family someday, so it’s probably better if it’s in a controlled environment. They’re kind of crazy. Plus, I know that if I don’t bring Benji along he’ll never let me forget it.”

“What do you mean I’ll never let you forget it?” Benji asked, curiosity in his expression.

“It’s being held at Stark Tower,” Will answered. “Clint, my brother, is a friend of Stark’s.”

Benji looked as if someone had just told him that the moon was a giant space ship and he was now captain.

“Well, it looks like we’re going,” Ethan said, shooting a smile at Will.

Three days later (Sunday):

Will, Ethan, Benji, and Jane were currently on a private IMF flight from Chicago – the site of their last mission – to New York and Stark Tower for the Barton Family Thanksgiving Celebration. About forty five minutes into the flight, Will pulled out his laptop, opening a simple and nondescript PowerPoint presentation entitled “the Barton Family.” He turned on the projector installed in the plane and hooked up his laptop, catching the others’ attention as the opening slide flickered into view on the large screen.

“You made a PowerPoint...about your family,” Ethan said slowly, shooting Will an incredulous look. “Is this secretly another mission? Your brothers aren’t terrorists, are they?”

“No, of course not,” Will replied, glaring at Ethan. “My brothers and I decided that this was necessary after an incident a few years ago involving a fire extinguisher, a butter knife, and a

Russian assassin. We figured that it'd be best if all of the guests invited were given a run through of the family to prevent anything else...*drastic* from happening."

"Well, let's see it, then," Benji chirped, turning to face the screen fully.

The first slide was relatively simple, just what looked like a timeline with nine names on it.

"Okay, so, this is a list of all of my brothers, from oldest to youngest. The most important thing to take away from this is the third name from the left. DO NOT mention Barney Barton. Every family has a black sheep and Barney is ours. He was a bastard who left Clint on the side of the road to die and who became a criminal, and I believe he deserves however many years of his life left that he's spending in prison," Will spat, causing the other three to look slightly shocked – they'd never seen Will this angry before, much less by the mere memory of someone.

Will flipped to the next slide, which held a picture of two slightly older looking men, one considerably taller than the other, while the shorter one had slightly longer, less spiky looking hair.

"These are my two older brothers," Will explained. "James is on the left and John is on the right. James is nine years older than me and John is seven years older. Don't be surprised by their British accents, they've both spent the majority of their lives in the UK and both currently live in England."

Will paused. "Now, before I switch to the next slide, there's something you guys need to know. I am a sextuplet. As in, I have five identical brothers."

Jane choked slightly on the water she was drinking. "I didn't think that was even possible," she sputtered. "I mean, wouldn't you all have been too small? Even triplets are prone to dying in infancy due to their small size."

"I don't know how it worked," Will shrugged. "But somehow we've all made it to adulthood. I just figured you should know, because one person that one of my brothers brought over once accused us of being clones."

"I'm having a really hard time imagining another five analysts cum field agents running around in suits with briefcases, nagging people about stupid risks and being pessimistic," Ethan said, half seriously and half teasingly.

Will sighed. "I'm actually the most organized of the six of us, so you don't have to worry about that."

He switched to the next slide, and the other three agents were met with a photograph of six identical looking men, all standing side by side. Will was fairly easy to pick out, though, considering he was the only one wearing a dress shirt and tie.

"Out of the six of us, I'm technically the oldest," Will continued, gesturing to himself in the far left of the picture. "Aaron is the second oldest, and Jason is the third. Next is Brian, and after him is Clint, while William is the youngest."

"William?" Ethan asked, quirked an eyebrow again.

"Yeah," Will grimaced. "I go by 'Will' and he goes by 'William'. It's because apparently after popping six babies out, our mom forgot that she'd already named one of us William so we ended up

with two Williams.”

“Neither of you went by your middle name?” Benji questioned.

“I don’t have a middle name and William’s middle name is James,” Will answered. “Obviously William couldn’t go by James, because, well, we already had a James. My parents just weren’t good at coming up with names. I guess it’s better than getting a girl’s name, though. Apparently if one of us had been a girl, we’d have been ‘Natalie.’”

“I don’t know, clean you up a bit and we might be able to make you look like a Natalie,” Jane joked, and Will had to resist the urge to pout, which was kind of a moot point, considering how he would probably end up pouting at something one of his brothers did, so his team would eventually see it anyway. He had to keep *some* of his dignity, though.

“Moving on,” Will said, changing to a slide with a picture of his eldest brother, James, on it. “You guys should also know that we always talk pretty openly about our jobs with one another. They know exactly what the IMF does and what I do within the IMF. Absolutely all of my brothers have a career in either the armed forces, law enforcement, or intelligence. You guys might have actually heard of my eldest brother, James, before. He works for MI6; he’s basically their Ethan Hunt, codename 007.”

It was Ethan’s turn to look properly gob-smacked this time. “I thought he had been killed on a mission in Turkey six months ago!” he blurted out, looking a little embarrassed at his exclamation afterwards.

“So did I, until he got around to calling me two weeks after his ‘death’,” Will grumbled. “There’ll probably be a lot of yelling about that at some point in the next week, just so you know.

“Next is John, who’s also older than I am. He’s a doctor actually, but he served in the British army in Afghanistan until he was invalidated back home. He got shot in the shoulder while treating someone on the frontline, and had some pretty severe damage. He also has a psychosomatic limp that comes and goes, but he’s mostly kept up with his training and he has a day job at a small clinic in London. However, he and his ‘flat-mate’ also work as consultants for the Scotland Yard’s homicide and violent crimes division. This will actually be our first Thanksgiving together since he’s gotten back from Afghanistan. We’ve skyped each other for the past few years.

“After John, we have Aaron,” Will continued. “Aaron was actually born with mental retardation, but some sleazy army recruiter who still needed to meet his quota faked Aaron’s tests scores so he was accepted. A couple months later we were told that he’d been blown up by a roadside bomb in Iraq. It turned out that that wasn’t actually true – the CIA had just used it as an excuse to spirit him away and use him as a test subject for an experimental drug to enhance intelligence and overall physical ability. It worked and Aaron became a permanent CIA operative and member of Operation Outcome - ”

“Wait, I thought Operation Outcome was disavowed five years ago,” Jane interrupted. “When all of those agents dropped dead all over the globe.”

“It *was* disavowed,” Will said, smiling grimly. “Aaron’s the only one who survived and he made it through by the skin of his teeth, with a fair amount of help from his conveniently employed brothers. Being IMF’s Head Analyst did have its perks.”

“Was that when the CIA’s criminal database crashed?” Benji asked, staring at Will. “Because I’m pretty sure that’s treason.”

Will shrugged. “It’s not the most drastic thing I’ve done for one of my brothers,” he said casually. “Anyway, next we have Jason. He’s the only one of us who never planned on entering the armed forces or intelligence. He was a pro baseball player for a while, but then his girlfriend was murdered and he decided to become a cop. He’s currently a detective in the NYPD’s second district.

“After Jason, there’s Brian. He can be kind of a loose cannon, despite the fact that he’s a former navy SEAL,” Will grumbled, although there was a faint fondness in his voice. “He’s currently on a SWAT team for the LAPD. Now, if he seems familiar to any of you, that’s probably because he was involved in an undercover mission that involved breaking a French drug lord out of police custody. IMF and a few other agencies did their best to cover up his alleged involvement, but it was pretty high priority at the time.”

“What sort of undercover mission involves saving a French drug lord?” Benji question, sounding slightly incredulous. “I thought to point was to *keep* them in custody.”

“A certain other intelligence agency fucked up and Montel had some dirt on them,” Will explained. “Nothing illegal, just some intel that could compromise some pretty major undercover operations. Brian was an obvious choice for the mission, as it was. He’d had a major falling out with his SWAT team and had quit the LAPD recently, and he’s a good operative. Of course, the fact that my brother Clint works for SHIELD, the intelligence agency with the leak, helped. As I’ve said, my brothers are willing to do some pretty drastic things for each other, although I think that Brian’s the only one who’s ended up on the FBI’s most wanted for one of us.”

“Isn’t SHIELD that agency that dealt with the alien invasion six months ago?” Ethan asked, perking up slightly. “The one in New York with the giant sky portal thing and those superheroes – what are they called? The Avengers or something like that.”

“Funny you should mention them,” Will replied dryly. “Clint actually *is* an Avenger. He’s the archer.”

“Is that why we’ll be staying at Stark Tower?” Jane questioned. “I heard that the Avengers had made that their base of operations, but, I mean, I was pretty leery on the whole superhero thing to start with.”

“Yeah, well, I have no doubt that Clint will be on the receiving end of some merciless teasing this year,” Will tried to say neutrally, although he was clearly trying not to let a smile slip onto his face. “It’s kind of funny, though, because Clint’s probably the one of us with the fewest reasons to believe in superheroes. Although I have to say, the fact that the one woman on their team, ‘Black Widow’, is now a superhero probably surprises me even more.”

“Are you saying that women can’t be superheroes?” Jane asked sharply, glaring at Will slightly.

“What? No!” Will said, blushing slightly. “It’s just that I’ve met Natasha before and while she may not be quite as pessimistic as me, she’s twice as cynical. With good reason, of course. It’s kind of surprising that Clint’s as optimistic as he is. SHIELD recruited him out of the army, actually, and you think that that’d finally make him stop believing in heroes after all the shit he’s been through.”

Will paused for a moment to clear his throat, looking uncomfortable about the direction of their current conversation.

“My last brother is William,” Will continued, diverting their attention back to the PowerPoint. “He recently shipped back out to Afghanistan, so you’ll probably just get to see him through Skype. He’s in a Explosive Ordinance Disposal unit in the US army.”

“Explosive Ordinance Disposal? Diffusing bombs?” Ethan repeated, quirking an eyebrow again. “That’s a little different.”

Will’s expression turned serious and his eyes were carefully blank as he replied: “He joined after we got the news that Aaron had been killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. William’s innately good at what he does, but the emotion behind it has always fueled him to do even better. It’s his first tour in Afghanistan, but during his first tour in Iraq he disarmed over eight hundred and seventy three bombs.”

“Out of everyone it sounds like *he* has the most dangerous job,” Benji muttered, sounding at least a little impressed. “Not that being a member of an elite spy team isn’t dangerous, we just risk getting blown up once a week, as opposed to every day.”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, his voice sounding a touch rougher than usual. “There was a lot of yelling after he told us he’d enlisted, especially because it was before we’d found out that Aaron wasn’t actually dead.”

Will’s three teammates fell silent as they processed the information they’d just been given. Will turned away from them and busied himself with turning off the projector and disconnecting his laptop, sitting back down in one of the surprisingly spacious seats in the IMF jet.

“So, basically the point of that presentation was to tell us to play nice, because all of your brothers are capable of killing us?” Ethan asked, restarting the conversation. They still had a solid forty five minutes left in the flight.

“Partially,” Will replied, a slight smile gracing his lips. “It’s also because, like I said earlier, my brothers and I are pretty open with each other, and when Brian brought along his partner Jim for the first time Jim nearly had an aneurism when Brian jumped right into a conversation about a highly classified operation they recently completed, giving us all the gritty details.

“Of course,” Will continued, a lopsided smirk settling on his face, “it’s also an attempt to protect each other. The first time Clint brought Natasha with him, she tried to kill James with some throwing knives, because he was still listed in SHIELD’s database as a high priority threat, because of a certain operation gone wrong a few years back. Of course, James then tried to take her out with a fire extinguisher, because she was still listed in MI6’s database as a Russian mercenary and terrorist.”

“No one’s *actually* going to try and kill us, are they?” Benji asked, sounding worried. “Because I thought that this was supposed to be a vacation, and trying not to be killed by Russians sounds more like my day job, than a holiday.”

“Don’t worry Benji, you can escape while they try and kill Ethan,” Jane teased. “He’s the high priority one. They probably won’t recognize you – you’re just a techie, after all.”

“*Just* a techie?” Benji said, offended. “I’m a field agent, too, you know. Plus, cyber terrorists can be even more dangerous regular ones! The most dangerous type of criminal is the one that can take out your organization without ever leaving their bedroom.”

“We’ll be in Stark Tower, Benji. I don’t think they have to worry very much about getting hacked,” Ethan pointed out. “Not that you’re not extremely fierce and deadly.”

Benji had an expression dangerously similar to a pout on his face, following Ethan’s teasing proclamation.

Will watched them, leaning back into his seat. He smiled slightly. This would work. Probably.

“This will work. Probably,” Clint said, as he surveyed the kitchen.

Much like his brother, Clint had spent a considerable amount of time preparing his fellow Avengers for the arrival of his relatives. A few of them, such as Bruce, seemed a little leery, but they were all receptive to the idea. Some, in fact, were a little more than receptive. Such as Tony. Although Clint suspected that Tony was just eager to dig up some embarrassing stories about him. There were plenty of those. He’d really have to watch them closely. (Both his brothers and Tony.)

Natasha seemed happy. Happier than she’d been since the Loki attack, at least. Which was pretty happy, actually. Clint was glad. Natasha needed some more good things in her life, and if that meant that Clint would have to listen to some of his more boisterous brothers (cough Brian cough) regale everyone with stories of Clint’s misspent youth, then that was a small price to pay.

Truth be told, it wasn’t just Natasha who needed some more laughter in their life. Clint has initially been uncomfortable and skittish around Thor, due to his experience with Loki, but Clint had come to find a bit of a kindred spirit in Thor. He knew a thing or two about being betrayed by your brother, after everything that had happened with Barney. However, Clint had been able to rely on the support of his other seven brothers afterwards – a luxury that Thor didn’t have. Clint couldn’t help but want to share that with Thor. He was sure that Thor would take to the Barton Clan like a duck to water.

Bruce had seemed a little uncomfortable when Clint had started talking about inviting his brothers over, and Clint couldn’t yet tell exactly what was making him so skittish. Maybe it had to do with the fact that all of his brothers were in law enforcement, armed forces or intelligence? Clint had seen Bruce’s (rather extensive) file, after all. The Green Guy didn’t seem to have a very good track record with those sorts of people. It could just be the large number to new people, though. Clint would say that he’d try to keep his brothers on their best behavior, but he knew that that was impossible. Brian was enough of a handful on his own, but combined with William’s rather crass humor and Jason’s love of being an epic troll, Clint knew that there was no point in even trying to reign them in.

Plus, he was pretty sure James would have John examine him for brain damage if he tried, considering how he was the one most likely to go along with Brian’s pranks. Junior agents still whispered stories of the year when Brian had gotten him a nerf bow for his birthday... (Coulson had, sadly, confiscated it.)

It would be interesting to see how Steve reacted to all of this, actually. He’d seemed welcoming and not at all uncomfortable, but Steve was a pretty straight and narrow sort of guy. Well, “straight”

may not be the right word, but, basically, Cap didn't deviate from the rules very much. As opposed to Clint's brothers. Eh, maybe he'd get along with Will. Clint thought about that for a moment.

On second thought, Will would be more likely to get along with Coulson. A stab of irrational jealousy shot through Clint, taking him by surprise before he tamped down on it. Will was a lot like Clint, but smarter and more cooperative. There was a reason he'd been adopted and not Clint. In fact, John had been the one to get adopted first, and thinking about him, Coulson would probably get along with John the best. They were both the nondescript badass type. The ones that you turned your back to as you held up a store, only to have them knock you out with a bag of flower. Or a cane.

Clint was more like Brian, the loud, flashy type – characteristics that made Coulson chastise him and roll his eyes. Clint would admit that there seemed to be a bit of fondness in these actions, but they were probably characteristics that Coulson would just find exasperating in a lover, or, rather, boyfriend.

There had been a couple times when Clint had thought Coulson might be interested, but those all involved straying eyes when Clint was dressed to impress for some mission or another. Even if there was a possibility of a sexual relationship, Clint wasn't desperate enough yet to get involved. He wasn't very good at no strings attached types of relationships, and what he felt for Coulson already had so many attached it might as well be a fly caught in a spider's web.

Of course, despite that, Clint had always held a little beacon of hope that maybe something would happen and Coulson would confess his unending love for him and sweep him off his feet. (Brian had laughed for what felt like *hours* at that mental image when Clint had told him, but once he'd stopped he'd been strangely supportive. Clint suspected it had something to do with a certain "Jim Street" that he heard about quite frequently.) Realistically that was never going to happen, though, but Clint couldn't help but selfishly guard Coulson by never inviting him to his brothers' Thanksgiving celebration. He didn't think he could take it if Coulson was attracted to one of his smarter, nicer sextuplets.

Well, he didn't have to worry much about Brian and William, not because they weren't nice and smart, but because their attitudes were too similar to his. Jason could be a little bit of a dick to people he didn't like, but he was still as sharp as a tack and Clint suspected that Coulson would probably appreciate Jason's pranks more than Clint's. Will was obviously *perfect* for Coulson, dedicated, hardworking and with a photographic memory to boot. Aaron was a possibility, too, now. Clint used to feel more of a kinship with him, understand what it was to be an outsider. His situation had never been as severe as Aaron's, but he understood, at least a little bit. Now Aaron was faster, stronger, smarter, *better*. Clint felt a little bit like he was getting left behind.

A part of him said that this was stupid, worrying about being inadequate. A part of him wanted to say to hell with it: the only person he should be worth something to was himself. He was an *Avenger*! A *superhero*! Of course, he was also a shitty SHIELD agent who let himself get mind controlled by the enemy and went on a killing spree, nearly taking down the helicarrier and getting his handler killed.

Clint still wasn't sure how his brothers would treat him now, after all that he'd done. John had of course been the first person Clint called following the Loki incident. He'd been calm, took it all in stride, and assured Clint that it wasn't his fault – that there was nothing he could have done. It made Clint feel a little better. A few hours later he'd received a call from Brian telling him to get his head out of his ass and to stop blaming himself. That'd helped, too. Each of his brothers had

called him within the next two days, each giving him the “It’s not your fault” speech. After Clint’s psych exam the next day, he was still under observation, but no longer on the suicide watch list.

Clint knew that his brothers would always have his back. He just wished he was certain that he could have theirs’ when the time came.

“Clint? Are you okay?”

Clint snapped out of his thoughts, his extensive training the only thing that kept him from jumping at the unexpected hand on his shoulder.

“Uh, yeah?” Clint replied eloquently, turning to face Steve, gently shrugging the super-soldier’s hand off his shoulder.

“You looked a little out of it there,” Steve said, his brow furrowing in concern as his eyes quickly and methodically checked Clint for any injuries or anything else out of place.

“Just a little tired and nervous, is all,” Clint answered, a halfhearted, lopsided grin on his face.

“Trying to figure out how best to Barton-proof the building.”

His humor fell a little flat, but Steve took it as the tentative offering that it was and nodded.

“Yeah, but I think I’m a little bit more concerned about how to keep Tony from causing some sort of incident. Maybe I should make a safety protocol for possible Tony-related accidents,” Steve said with a teasing edge to his voice. “I don’t want some angry spy trying to kill him. I’d suggest removing the fire extinguishers, but that’d probably be a safety hazard.”

“Are there even any fire extinguishers in Stark Tower?” Clint asked, a slightly contemplative look on his face. “Doesn’t Stark just have a little robot that follows him around and puts out fires?”

“Oh, yes – Dummy,” Steve replied. “I doubt he can put out *every* fire Stark starts, though. There must be others somewhere...”

They slipped into a comfortable silence for a few moments before Steve turned back to look at Clint, eyes regaining a calculating gleam, militarily assessing Clint before softening. He reached up again and placed his hand on Clint’s right bicep, a gesture that was meant to be comforting, but always made Clint’s skin crawl uncomfortably. Clint couldn’t entirely understand Steve’s need to physically reassure people, but he hadn’t yet figured out a way to get Steve to stop without sounding like cold bastard.

“If you ever need to talk – about anything – please know that you can come to me,” Steve told him, looking Clint directly in the eyes, pinning the archer down with his intense but kind stare.

“I will,” Clint replied after a moment. There was no way he was upholding that promise, but if it made Cap feel a bit better, then a little white lie might be okay. Unless he was desperate, Clint would never go to anyone but his brothers for emotional help. In those moments he was too raw – too vulnerable.

Steve smiled.

“Now, when did you say that your brothers are coming over?” he asked, his tone light again.

“Um, sometime between noon and three,” Clint replied, eyes darting over to check the clock on the wall opposite the stove, above the breakfast nook. Which wasn’t really a “nook” considering it could hold seven people. Nine, if they squished.

“So, soon, then,” Steve continued. It was ten past twelve currently. “Do you want everyone to meet each other right when they arrive or would it be better to wait until dinner for introductions?”

“Well, I guess we can do formal introductions at dinner, considering Will’s bringing along some new friends this year that the others haven’t met either, but if you’d like we can wait down by the entrance to greet people as they arrive,” Clint said. “I’m pretty sure Natasha is over at SHIELD headquarters at the moment, though. She probably won’t be back until five, and I think Tony and Bruce were working on something in the lab...”

“But, luckily for you, we just finished!” a voice interrupted, floating in from the next room, quickly followed by Tony Stark. “JARVIS just detected an IMF registered vehicle about a block away, by the way.”

“Why don’t we head down?” Bruce said, warmly. “We’ll meet them at the door. Unless, of course, you’d rather have some time alone together first.”

Clint appreciated Bruce’s polite courtesy, but he knew that Tony would find a way to interrupt anyway, so there was really no point.

“Nah, you guys are fine,” he said, smiling falsely again. He saw Bruce frown slightly as he assessed Clint’s fake smile, but the scientist didn’t comment on it.

They headed downstairs (or, rather, down the elevator), ending up in the lobby of Avengers Tower (née Stark Tower) just as Will and his three friends pushed open the glass doors of the front entrance. For the first time in a while, Clint felt a genuine smile appear on his face once he caught sight of his brother. Will looked a little tired, a little ragged around the edges, but, strangely, he seemed happier than the last time Clint had seen him. Clint’s pace quickened slightly as he went forward to envelop his brother in a tight hug, a silly grin on his face now.

Will squeezed him back before letting go. Clint’s attention then shifted to the other three people with Will, automatically stepping slightly in front of Will, his stance subtly defensive, despite knowing how much Will must trust these three to have brought them to the family celebration. As he examined the other IMF agents, his mind automatically supplied names for two of them: Ethan Hunt and Jane Carter. The third one he couldn’t quite place...

“Hey,” he said, holding out his hand for Ethan to shake, as he was at the front of the party. “Clint Barton, Will’s brother, although you’ve probably gathered that already.”

“Ethan Hunt,” the other replied, smiling. “Ah, *Will’s* team leader.”

Clint turned back to Will, a slightly surprised expression on his face.

“Team leader? I thought you said you were going back to being Head Analyst after the whole Hendricks debacle,” he said, seeming happy, but tentatively so.

“Uh, yeah,” Will replied, not quite meeting Clint’s eyes. “I know I told James that I wasn’t going to go back out into the field again, but I kept getting restless behind a computer all day. Plus, the new Secretary’s an asshole.”

Clint's grin returned full force.

"Hah, I knew you wouldn't be able to keep away," he said gleefully, giving Will's left arm a light punch. "If you were still an analyst I think we'd have to get a DNA test done to make sure you're actually a Barton."

Will rolled his eyes, but couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face.

"You know, 'Barton' isn't even my last name anymore. In fact, it's not even the name I had before 'Brandt.' I was 'William Walsh' before, when Jason and I got adopted," Will replied.

"I never liked the sound of that. No ring to it," Clint said, scrunching up his face in distaste. "William Barton sounds much better. You'll always be a Barton and you know it."

Will opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by Benji.

"I know you showed us pictures and warned us about having identical brothers, but this is still surreal," the techie blurted, staring at the two bickering brothers. Clint shot him a questioning, 'And you are...?' look, causing Benji to look slightly embarrassed. "I'm Benji Dunn, by the way. Technical field agent for the team."

"You're not still using HammerTech products over at IMF, are you?" a different voice interrupted. "Because if you are, I'll probably have to kick you out of this building. Right now."

Ethan would later describe the sound that Benji made as a 'squee.' Will would secretly agree and Jane would laugh. Benji would turn bright red. At the moment, though, Benji was too busy freaking out about talking to *the Tony Stark* to care about his image.

"Of course not!" he exclaimed, a ridiculous grin on his face. "I finally managed to convince the IMF to switch over to Eureka products after Ethan nearly fell off of the side of the Burj Khalifa due to a malfunction in the HammerTech superglue gloves we were using. I mean, I'd been trying to convince them to switch over for *years* now, but they just wouldn't listen! Of course I'd *love* to switch over to Stark Industries, but you only supply SHIELD now..."

There was an ambitious, hopeful glint in Benji's eyes as he stared at Tony. He'd somehow managed to cross the room in the meantime (Will was sure he hadn't seen him move...) and was standing directly in front of the genius-billionaire-playboy-philanthropist.

"I don't manufacture weapons anymore," Tony said, although he was quite noticeably preening under Benji's praise. "Eureka is pretty good, though. For a second choice."

Benji looked like he was going to faint from happiness. He had *Tony Stark's* approval. He could die happy now.

"We're spies, though," Benji said, regaining his voice. "We don't only need weapons. Our supercomputer is so outdated it's not even funny anymore! The University of Texas at Austin is getting a new, ten petaflop supercomputer and we're still working with *teraflops*! There are college undergrads who get to work with fancier toys than me and I work for a espionage organization!"

Clint stifled a laugh as he watched Tony and Benji going into full on geek mode, Bruce jumping in on the conversation, shyly making suggestions that had the IMF agent nearly jumping up and down for joy.

“Well, I’m Jane,” a female voice said, causing Clint to turn his head back to the other three people in his company, grasping the dark haired woman’s offered hand and shaking it firmly. “Don’t mind Benji. He was nearly bouncing off the walls when he heard we’d be staying in Stark Tower. He’s not trying to be rude.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Clint replied, smiling again. “Plus, it gives me more time to talk to a lovely lady.”

Clint didn’t mean anything by the flirting – it was just something he did. It helped him take his mind off of Coulson for a little while, too, even if he just ended up feeling guilty later (which was ridiculous, considering they weren’t together and they would never be together anyway). Will sent him a sharp look.

“Stop flirting with my teammate, Clint,” Will said, knocking his brother on the back to the head lightly. “Your boyfriend’s going to get jealous.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Clint protested, turning a little red.

“You’re right,” Will replied dryly. “He’s just the guy you’ve been pining after for the last seven years.”

“Shut up,” Clint growled, but there was no heat behind it. “It’s not like you can talk. You haven’t had a boyfriend since high school.”

Will gave in to the urge to pout. He saw Ethan stifling a laugh out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey, I don’t mind a little harmless flirting,” Jane said, smiling coyly back at Clint. “It is a little strange because he looks like you, though. Except without the suit and tie, which is something I never thought I’d ever say. You without a suit is less mind shattering than I thought it would be.”

“Would you like to see a photo of him wearing a hoodie?” Clint asked, perking up, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I even have a couple of him asleep on the couch wearing it. It’s bright red.”

“Clint,” Will protested, his voice dangerously close to a whine. “You said you wouldn’t show them that picture!”

“No I didn’t,” Clint said petulantly. “You just said it wouldn’t be used in the PowerPoint. I have it on my phone right here - ”

Will lunged for the StarkPhone as Clint pulled it out of his pocket, but Clint, anticipating the attack, twisted away from his brother’s grasp. Will grasped for the phone again, feinting to the left before switching directions and going for Clint’s unguarded right side, only to have his brother duck and summersault to the left, towards Jane and Ethan. Will gave up on trying to grab the phone and just tackled Clint, knocking the wind out of both of their lungs. Will felt Clint start to tremble under his weight, and Will rolled off of him, worried that maybe he’d injured his brother. Only to find Clint laughing his ass off. Will couldn’t help but grin too.

“Your cold, professional mask has officially been shot to hell,” a voice broke in from above them and Will glanced up to see Ethan smiling down at them. Will felt his face burn with embarrassment as he jumped up from the floor, trying to straighten out his now crooked tie and brush the dust off of his dress shirt.

“Like I said, gooey marshmallow center,” Jane laughed, also smiling.

Clint let out a small huff of laughter at that, eyes sparkling with mirth. Will held his hand out to pull Clint up from the floor, Clint grasping it firmly and jumping back to his feet.

“Why don’t I show you guys to your rooms now,” Clint said after dusting himself off and smoothing out his hair (which really didn’t do much).

They nodded and grabbed their bags, following Clint over to the elevators. Clint glanced over to Benji, who was still chatting avidly with Tony and Bruce before sending a questioning look towards Ethan, Jane, and Will, who shook their heads, nonverbally telling him that trying to pull Benji away from the conversation would not be possible. Clint grabbed Benji’s suitcase before pushing the up button on the elevator.

They travelled up to the seventy fifth storey of the tower before getting off, finding themselves in some sort of sitting room with a few chairs and couches and a large TV hung on the opposite wall. There was a small kitchen off to the right and another hallway on the left, presumably leading to the bedrooms.

“This level is currently unoccupied,” Clint explained, moving into the room. “There are six bedrooms, so you can all have your own rooms, unless you would like to share...” Clint shot a suggestive smirk at Will who turned red again. “But when the others come there will probably be one or two more people on this floor with you. I was thinking maybe Brian and Jim? I don’t know if John and Jason are bringing anyone this year.”

Will groaned before he realized what he was doing, again embarrassed when his teammates turned to look at him to see what was the matter.

“Seriously? Brian?” he asked Clint, giving up on trying to sound mature. It was his vacation, damn it. “He better not pull anything, because I don’t know if it would be worse to have a fire extinguisher or not have a fire extinguisher around him. I don’t want a repeat of three years ago when he dyed my hair blue.”

“Aw, he’s not that bad, Will,” Clint protested. “Plus, that was an accident. He was trying to get James and you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t have laughed, at least a little, if it had been James he got. Not to mention, he’s bringing along Jim again who should be able to rein him in at least a little.”

Will sighed but didn’t argue any further. He picked up his suitcase again and claimed the first bedroom. Jane and Ethan started to follow him to pick out their own rooms, but were stopped by Clint. Ethan and Jane immediately became a little on edge, as they took in Clint’s transformed expression, no longer light and happy, but serious and a little cold.

“I hope that this conversation is unnecessary, but I’d just like to tell the two of you, and Benji, but I expect that you’ll pass this on to him, that if you hurt Will I will personally track you down and shoot you with so many arrows that you’ll look like a porcupine. I’ll then get Natasha to hide the bodies where no one will *ever* find them and I’ll get Coulson to make it look like the three of you never existed in the first place,” Clint said, deadly serious. “I don’t know if you guys realize how much this holiday means to Will. You don’t get a personal invite unless you’re considered family, so don’t fuck this up. This is especially important for Will because you guys are the first people he’s ever invited. So, while I’ll trust my brother’s judgment for now, if you ever hurt him you’re *dead*.”

Clint then went right back to cheery and smiling, as if nothing had happened.

“Once you guys are settled in, you can come back downstairs to wait for the others or you can hang out here, or, if you’d like, the next floor up is kind of the community gathering floor. We’ll probably meet there once everybody’s here,” he said, moving back past them towards the elevator. “If you need help with anything, you can always ask JARVIS – he’s an AI that Stark built, who monitors the whole tower. We’ll have a complete tour once everyone’s here. Have fun!”

Once the elevator doors closed behind him, Ethan and Jane looked at each other.

“I think I understand now, why some people are terrified of meeting the in-laws,” Jane muttered. “Clint seems nice enough, though. We’ll probably survive this. Although you probably shouldn’t mention the whole debacle with faking your wife’s death and how that affected Will. You’ll probably get killed.”

Ethan looked a little pale.

Chapter 2: Six Brothers

Chapter Summary

And more characters arrive! I hope they're all in character... Feedback is appreciated! Um, no extra warnings on this chapter, I guess. Well, maybe I should warn for Brian. Because he kind of got away from me, and he's kind of... I don't know. Mentions of sex? Nothing graphic at all. Not even remotely. There is eyeliner, though. I'm sorry for the eyeliner. It just sort of happened. I have no idea why. Eh. Enjoy this chapter, though! Oh - also, I gave Q a name. It's not his actual name because no one knows Skyfall Q's actual name. Hope that's okay with everybody.

When Clint reemerged downstairs, he became slightly panicked. Normally he was a fairly calm person (relative to the rest of the Avengers) but, well... Clint watched in mild horror as Captain America chatted with Brian Gamble. *Captain America*. Clint, logically, knew that Steve wasn't an innocent little lamb, he had been the army after all, but still: *Brian*. Sure, Brian was a good person once you got past the attitude and language, but he was most certainly the most rebellious of the brothers. You could tell that pretty easily just by looking at him – he had three ear piercings and “Gamble” tattooed up his right arm, and was he wearing *eyeliner*?

“Hey, Bri!” Clint called, walking on over to where Brian, Steve, and Jim stood. “And nice to see you, too, Jim. Brian hasn't scared you away yet?”

“Nah,” Jim laughed. “It takes a little more than breaking an international criminal out of jail to make me head for the hills,” he paused. “Well, as long as it's just an undercover mission. If it was for real I might have some issues. Not that Brian would ever actually do something like that...”

“course not,” Brian said cheerfully. “I'm a by the book kind of guy, you know?”

“Like I said, you're full of shit,” Jim teased, rolling his eyes.

Clint saw a flicker of something, maybe hurt, in Brian's eyes at that comment, but it was quickly covered up by Brian's loud, swaggering outer persona. Jim didn't seem to notice, continuing to talk with Steve, which concerned Clint a little bit, filing it away for later to discuss with his brother. See, about half of Brian's attitude was just the way he was, but the other half was there to discourage people from digging any deeper. It was certainly effective, sometimes *too* effective, and Clint would often end up mentally beating himself up for not noticing when Brian was having a problem sooner. Overall, Clint was good at understanding his brothers, *really* good (he was a secret agent, after all) but Brian had always been just slightly out of his grasp. James seemed to be the only one who could read Brian, which was kind of good and kind of bad, because James tended to have a bit of a tough love philosophy.

“Bri,” Clint started, trying his best to look innocent. “Is there a reason you're wearing eyeliner?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was for an op?” Brian asked, already knowing the answer.

“Were you posing as a hooker or something?” Clint teased. “You know, I don’t think that many hookers wear full body armor and carry a sniper rifle, though. You get a kinky boyfriend?”

“Fuck you,” Brian shot back, but he was clearly trying not to smile. “I can’t help being prettier than you in eyeliner. We may be ‘identical’ but we’ve always known who got all the looks.”

If Brian had long hair, Clint was pretty sure he would have mockingly flipped it right then. Clint liked this Brian better, the one he could bullshit with for hours in a way that most other people didn’t seem to understand. People always thought that they were being catty or competitive or something, but there really wasn’t anything behind what either of them did or said. It was nice – easy.

“Seriously, though,” Clint said, quirking an eyebrow playfully. “What’s with the makeup? Every time I see you, you look more like a teenager than you did when you were in high school.”

“Lost a bet,” Brian admitted, rolling his eyes. “Sanchez bet that she could out drink me. If I lost, I’d get to be the official ‘girl’ of the team and she’d get to replace me as one of the guys. She said I had to let her ‘doll me up’ however she wanted, too. As you can see, I lost.”

“You’re just lucky that Sanchez doesn’t actually own any dresses,” Jim cut in, still grinning. “She’s certainly ruthless enough to make you wear one.”

“Oh god, anything but that,” Brian moaned, scrubbing one hand across his face, unintentionally smearing his eyeliner. “I’m never betting against Sanchez again. Ever.”

“That’s kind of rude,” Steve said suddenly, breaking into the conversation.

“What’s rude?” Clint asked, a questioning look on his face. The other two had similar expressions. “Not gambling?”

“Making fun of a man for wearing a dress,” Steve answered seriously. “I was reading about it online. There’s a whole community of people who like wearing the clothes of the opposite gender. It’s not polite to mock them.”

“And this is the sad moment when you realize that a guy who’s been under ice for the past seventy years is more progressive than you,” Brian muttered. Clint was unsure whether the others were meant to hear that comment.

“I guess that’s okay if you want to,” Jim admitted, a little awkwardly. “And I suppose we should be more accepting, but, well, Brian doesn’t really like dresses. At all. And I don’t think he’d pull it off very well. Not the right body type.”

“But if he ever were to want to wear a dress, he should be able to without being ridiculed,” Steve pushed, and Clint recognized his firm ‘I-have-an-opinion-on-this-subject’ look.

“Am I even part of this conversation anymore?” Brian grumbled to Clint, low enough so that the other two couldn’t hear. “I was just trying to say that I don’t like wearing girls’ clothing.”

“I think Steve gets that,” Clint replied just as quietly. “He just has a very strong sense of justice and an unconditional anti-bullying policy. Last week he gave us all a speech about ableism during dinner, complete with his annoyance about how Microsoft Word doesn’t accept ‘ableism’ as a real

word. Tony tried to argue that it doesn't accept 'ginormous' as a word either, despite the fact that it's used more often in conversation, but I think that just pissed Steve off."

"So he's like Hermione Granger," Brian summarized.

"Who?" Clint asked, completely lost.

"You know, the wizard chick from *Harry Potter*," Brian supplied, looking at his brother expectantly.

Clint gave him a blank look.

"Damn, you've been living under a rock, bro!" Brian laughed. "*Harry Potter* has only been the biggest thing for, like, the last fourteen years! Even *I've* read all the books!"

"You've actually read something longer than a magazine since leaving high school?" Clint said jokingly, faking shock. "Now I've *got* to see what the hype's about."

"Shut up," Brian said again, punching Clint lightly in the arm. "I'm a very cultured individual."

"I think I missed part of this conversation," Jim's voice broke in. "Because I just heard Brian declare himself 'a very cultured individual'."

"Wouldn't you like to know," Brian replied, wagging his eyebrows suggestively, completely contradicting any declarations of class.

"You know what," Clint said, interrupting them before they could start exchanging snappy comments, "why don't I show you guys to your rooms? You should probably get settled in before everyone else arrives and this place becomes more of a madhouse than it already is."

"Sure," Brian agreed, hefting his backpack up onto his shoulders. "This place is huge. Do we each get our own rooms this time? Because I'm not sharing with Jason again. Last time he spent *hours* sexting his girlfriend."

"The one who keeps ditching out on Jason's invites?" Clint asked curiously, turning to Brian after pressing the up button for the elevator. "Allison, right?"

"I didn't ask," Brian replied, making a face. "I don't want the juicy details of my brother's sex life."

"Knowing the name of the person your brother's in a relationship with is common courtesy, not just snooping around their sex life," Clint protested. "It's not like he's trying to hide her from us or anything. He mentions her pretty regularly; I'm just wondering if they broke up, because he said something came up and she wasn't coming with."

"I haven't heard anything," Brian answered, shaking his head, shifting the heavy backpack on his shoulders before stepping into the elevator.

"He's the detective, right?" Jim asked, breaking into the brothers' conversation. "For the NYPD?"

"Yeah," Clint answered, pressing the button for the seventy fifth floor.

“He’s also the one who helped me dye Will’s hair blue three years ago,” Brian snickered. “Will’s the one with a stick up his ass.”

“Hey,” Clint protested, defending his other brother. “Will’s not that bad. He’s still pissed at you for that, though. He actually brought a few friends over this year, and I even got him to tackle me when I threatened to show his teammates the pictures of him asleep on the couch wearing that red hoodie we gave him last year.”

“Aww, our little brother’s growing up,” Brian cooed mockingly. “Although I have to say, I never thought Will would be adventurous enough to be in a poly relationship.”

“Give him a break, Bri,” Clint sighed, stepping out of the elevator as the door opened. “Just because Will hasn’t had a boyfriend in a while doesn’t automatically mean that he’s banging the first person he brings home to visit. You better cut the commentary about his relationship status, though, because you two get to share this floor. Will and his friends have taken the first four rooms – you and Jim get the last two at the end of the hall.”

Just as Clint finished speaking, all four IMF agents stepped out of the first bedroom into the hallway.

Brian took the opportunity to completely ignore Clint’s suggestion that he not aggravate his other brother by wolf whistling, a smirk stretching over his face.

“Three people in your bedroom, Will?” he said, licking his lips suggestively. “What have you been up to this past year?”

“Shut up, Brian,” Will snapped, glaring at his brother. “They’re my teammates.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Brian asked, still smirking. “I’ve banged teammates before.”

“Some of us don’t feel the need to have sex with everyone we meet,” Will shot back, rolling his eyes before turning to Ethan, Jane, and Benji. “Guys, this is my brother Brian. Yes, he’s always like this, sadly.”

“You’re just still sore about the hair dye incident, aren’t you, bro?” Brian said, pouting. The pout was surprisingly innocent looking, which made Will all the more wary. It was most *certainly* fake. There was no way Brian could *ever* be described as innocent. “Clint was telling me that you were still pissed. I said I was sorry. You weren’t even the target.”

“Whatever,” Will muttered. “Just don’t do it again.”

“I knew you’d understand,” Brian replied, his face all the sudden losing the downtrodden puppy look, replaced by a large, toothy grin.

“This is surreal,” Benji blurted suddenly. “I know I said that when I met Clint, but this is even weirder. It’s like I’m trapped in some alternate universe where Will’s the lead singer in a screamo band and hangs out in goth clubs every night.”

“Yeah, what’s with the eyeliner?” Will asked, squinting at Brian to make sure he was seeing correctly. “You look like a prostitute.”

“Why does everybody keep saying I look like a hooker?” Brian whined, irritably rubbing at his eyes again, his fingers coming back with smudges of black on them. “And I’m not in a screamo band. I’m on a SWAT team for the LAPD.”

“Don’t do that,” Will sighed, sounding irritated. “You’re just smearing the eyeliner, and that just makes you look like a prostitute who’s been working all night.”

“I’m not wearing this because I *want* to,” Brian snapped, sounding genuinely annoyed for the first time since arriving at the tower. “I lost a bet.”

“Hey! Chill, you two,” Clint interrupted, sounding a little disappointed. “I can move Brian and Jim to the next floor down if you guys can’t get along, but I’d kind of like you two to lay off each other for at least the next week. I don’t want to have to be breaking up fights every time you’re in the same room.”

“Sorry, Clint,” Will said, looking a little sheepish.

“I’ll try to play nice,” Brian sighed reluctantly. “Makes you kind of wonder how John does it, though, doesn’t it? Or, you know, mothers in general. Not that John is feminine, because he’s really not. Just. You guys know what I mean.”

Will cracked a tentative smile and Clint let out a huff of surprised laughter.

“You better not let him hear that,” Will said, fully smiling now. “John will kick your ass with his cane.”

“Which is an absolutely terrifying mental image,” Brian continued, a slightly horrified look on his face.

“So a top IMF agent, a SWAT operative, and a superhero sniper are all afraid of an injured British doctor,” Ethan asked, looking equal parts amused and intrigued. “How has he managed to cow you all into obeying him?”

Ethan suddenly found himself pinned down by three incredulous stares, intense enough that some small part of Ethan wondered when his face was going to start burning off. Seriously – laser eyes. Not that he minded having all of Will’s attention. Will’s intense look was pretty hot, actually –

“You *did* show him the PowerPoint, didn’t you?” Clint asked, glancing away for a moment to look at Will. “I *told* you to show them the PowerPoint.”

“I did show it to them,” Will retorted, “but Ethan has a rather thick skull. I don’t think it got through.”

“Why don’t we explain John Watson more thoroughly so nobody somehow manages to bring down his almighty wrath down upon us all,” Brian said, motioning everyone over into the living room from the hallway, sitting (more lounging) on one of the couches. “John is our second oldest brother,” he continued once everyone was seated and paying close attention. “He got his medical training paid for by the British army and then shipped out to serve in Afghanistan, as a military doctor. Last year he was invalidated back home because he got shot in the shoulder.”

“But even though that makes it sound like he’s just a doctor who’s a war vet, he’s really not,” Clint cut in, picking up from Brian. “He’s a crack shot. Not quite as good as me, but really good. The

scary part is that he's not afraid to shoot you dead if he believes it's proper justice. I know that may not sound like much coming from a guy who kills people for a living, but it really is. See, John's *really* loyal. His best friend, the guy who he rents an apartment with right now, was going to be murdered by a serial killer, but then John saw what was going on and shot the guy dead through the window of the building next door. *And he'd only known Sherlock for one day.* He then proceeded to swear to the police that he had no clue what happened."

"*That's* the scary part," Will interjected. "John isn't the type of guy you'd look twice at, normally. He wears these ridiculous, overlarge, beige sweaters and sometimes has to use a cane. But he's a *soldier*. He's like William – he can't get enough of war. It's a drug to him. When he got invalidated back home he was having all kinds of problems, such as his psychosomatic limp, which his therapist thought were due to PTSD. They weren't. It's because he *missed* the war. He needed it to function."

"Apparently chasing serial killers is enough to tide him over, though," Brian finished, shifting so that his head lay in Jim's lap. Jim rolled his eyes, but didn't make him move, instead laying a hand on top of Brian's head.

"I was thinking pretty much the same thing as you guys when I first met him," Jim admitted, eyes moving to look up at Jane, Benji, and Ethan sitting on the couch across from him. "I mean, I didn't really meet him because he was over in Afghanistan at the time, but we skyped him. I knew that he was near the front in an active warzone, but I thought of him more as a doctor than as a soldier. He seemed too polite and soft spoken to be a soldier. Then his camp got attacked in the middle of our conversation and I watched him shoot three men, all kill shots, before running off to perform surgery on a fallen lieutenant. The Royal Army Medical Corps aren't even supposed to be a fighting division!"

"Basically, don't underestimate a Barton brother, no matter how cuddly they seem," Clint chirped, a lopsided grin on his face. "It's like what Will told me about your first meeting. You guys all underestimated him because you thought he was just an analyst, not realizing that he could take out all of you without breaking a sweat."

"Clint," Will said, sounding embarrassed. "I'm not *that* good. Plus, when I met them I *was* just an analyst."

"Will," Brian cut in, staring at his brother a little intensely. "You're part of the Barton family. You were *born* to kick ass. It's what we *do*. Wear it with pride!"

Will opened his mouth to retort, but was cut off by a slightly mechanical sounding voice issuing from an overhead speaker that he couldn't quite pinpoint the location of.

"Agent Barton," the voice said in a polite and slightly soothing voice. "I do not mean to interrupt, but there appears to be an unknown person in the dining room on the next floor up. He was not in my databases, but his image appears to match that of one of the pictures in your PowerPoint. MI6 Agent James Bond, if I am not mistaken. Should I alert him of your presence on this level?"

"Nah," Clint replied, a bit of a mischievous grin settling on his face. "We'll go meet him up there ourselves. Just don't tell him we're coming. It'll be a nice surprise."

"Agent Barton," the voice started, sounding a little concerned now, "I understand that this is your brother, but I do not believe that it is a wise idea to sneak up on a man trained in espionage. He might not take kindly to it."

“It’s fine,” Brian cut in. “It’s a game we play every year – see who can surprise James. James is still the reigning champion, but Clint’s got the home field advantage this year. He’ll know to be expecting us eventually. He won’t flip out on us.”

“You understand this situation better than I, Officer Gamble,” the AI conceded. “I will not notify Agent Bond of your presence.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Clint replied, grinning.

“Who was that?” Jim asked, once the intercom was turned off. “Part of Stark’s security team or something?”

“JARVIS is an AI that Stark built – artificial intelligence,” Clint clarified. “He’s...kind of like a butler, security team, secretary, and state of the art computer system all rolled into one.”

Everyone turned to look at Benji, concerned, as he let out a small whimper.

“...I think you broke him,” Jane said after a few moments, putting a hand on Benji’s shoulder to see if he would respond. He didn’t.

“Well,” Clint said after a moment, “I’m going to go try and sneak up on James. You guys wait for about five minutes before taking the elevator up, okay? Wish me luck.”

“How are you planning on getting up there?” Ethan asked, looking around for a set of stairs.

“How else?” Clint replied, a smirk on his face before he walked over to the window, opened it, and swung himself out and up. His feet disappeared the next moment as he began to climb up the side of the building. No biggie. He was just risking a *seventy five storey drop*.

Ethan got a strange glint in his eyes and opened his mouth to say something before being abruptly cut off by twin glares from Jane and Will.

“Don’t you even *think* about it,” Will growled, a sound which Ethan should have felt reprimanded by, but instead just felt turned on by. He was completely fucked. He nodded reluctantly, and Jane shot Will an approving look.

“See what I have to put up with?” Will groaned, turning his now downtrodden glaze to Jane, who patted him on the back sympathetically. “Whenever I see them again I get to hear them retell every single way in which they’ve nearly died in the past year. William is absolutely *horrible*. He’s always taking off his body armor when he’s diffusing a large amount of bombs, because, as he puts it, ‘If I’m going to die, I want to die comfortable.’”

“I can kind of understand where he’s coming from,” Brian said, butting in. “I mean, I only have to wear some Kevlar and even that’s fucking uncomfortable. I can’t imagine having to wear that marshmallow body suit all the time out on a Middle Eastern summer day.”

“You better not ditch your Kevlar,” Will said, glaring at his brother. “I’ll pull some strings in the IMF and get you stuck teaching junior officers for the rest of your *life*.”

Brian rolled his eyes.

“Well, it’s been about five minutes now,” Jim said, breaking the momentary silence. “Why don’t we head upstairs to meet James? See how Clint did?”

Just as he finished, the elevator door opened and a slightly taller man stepped out, dragging Clint behind him by his shirt collar. He looked remarkably like Clint, Brian, and Will, but his hair was a little blonder and he looked slightly older. He looked half amused and half annoyed as he hefted a disgruntled looking Clint over into the room, plopping him down in an unoccupied armchair before pulling out a small notebook and pen and making a tally mark.

“Sixty three to zero,” he recited, glancing over at Clint, who maturely stuck his tongue out. “Although I have to say, you’re doing better. I was expecting you to come through the air vents instead of the window. Apparently becoming a superhero hasn’t completely killed your ability to move silently.”

James looked away from Clint now to survey the other people in the room, his eyes resting on Ethan, Jane, and Benji. His eyebrows rose minutely, although you would only be able to tell if you were specifically watching for it. He glanced back over at Will, shooting him a questioning look.

“And these are...?” he asked, his tone a touch impatient. “I recognize Hunt but not the other two. Friends of yours, Will?”

“Jane Carter,” Jane answered calmly, although her expression was not soft.

“I’m Benji Dunn,” Benji said, following Jane’s lead, although he was more noticeably nervous.

“They’re my teammates,” Will cut in, also sounding slightly nervous, but it was only detectible by his brothers. “I know I said that I was going to go back to being Head Analyst after the Hendricks mission, but I ended up changing my mind. I’m back in the field.”

James looked at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable, before he answered, “I suppose if that’s what you want. I’ve never really been a fan of analysts, but I can’t say I’m happy that you’re back to tracking down terrorists and risking your life on a daily basis.”

“Like *you* can talk,” Brian complained, twisting around from where he was laying on the couch onto his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows (Jim winced slightly as they dug into his thighs) so that he could look James in the eye. “I mean, what the fuck, James? You call us two weeks later to say, ‘By the way, I’m still alive and hanging out on a tropical island’ after we’ve been told you’re dead and you somehow expect to be able to lecture us on worrying you? Fuck you!”

“I called you, didn’t I?” James replied coolly. “That’s more than most people got. I couldn’t even move for the first three days and I couldn’t keep my balance for a full week. I still haven’t regained full use of my arm. This was not a trivial injury.”

Brian let out a low growl, unintentionally, and his eyes narrowed as he glared at his older brother. “You could have had someone hold the phone up to your face. You could have found a way,” he snapped. “Remember what it was like when we thought Aaron was dead? You can’t *do* that to us!”

“And what about when I actually die? Has that crossed your mind?” James said, his voice louder and harsher than before. “I won’t always be here to hold your hand. You do know that, don’t you? This isn’t kindergarten anymore.”

Brian shot James an absolutely murderous look before standing up from the couch. He grabbed his backpack which was still lying at the entrance to the hallway before taking off down the hall,

choosing the first available room and slamming the door behind him. No one said anything for a while as the echo of the slammed door reverberated in the room.

“Guys, meet my older brother, James,” Will muttered, just loud enough for the others to hear.

“Not you too,” James sighed, running a hand through his short cropped hair in frustration. “I honestly wasn’t trying to hide from you or abandon you. I needed a little time away from everything and I really was in a bad state, medically.”

“It’s just because Brian cares, James,” Clint said, sounding incredibly tired. “It wasn’t particularly pleasant for me either, considering what happened to my handler a few months prior to your ‘death’. Same with Will. He’s still coping with the Julia incident.”

James sighed again. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Let me go talk to Brian.”

“You do that,” Clint replied, getting up from the armchair he was in to curl up next to Jim in Brian’s vacated space. “Just try to be sensitive, okay?”

James nodded before heading over to the hallway and to Brian’s room. The others heard him knock softly on the door, followed by a nearly whispered conversation before a soft click signified the door being opened for James. A moment later, the door clicked shut again.

“Is he always like that?” Benji asked, breaking the silence.

“Like what?” Will asked, turning his head to look at his teammate.

“So...intense,” Benji said, fumbling for the right word. “Bleak. Not cold, exactly, but...”

“Most of the time,” Clint replied, chewing his bottom lip in thought. “He’s normally not quite as angry, but a good friend of his died recently, so I guess it’s kind of understandable. He cares a lot more than he lets on, though.”

“Yeah,” Will echoed, leaning into Ethan’s side unconsciously. “Notice how he made the argument about how his death would affect *us* instead of how much he needed to get away from everything. I think it’s something he worries about a lot. He’s not like John who needs to hear from us every few months to make sure we’re doing okay – he keeps tabs on us in other ways, less hands on ways. He’s the one I went to after the whole thing with Julia. He didn’t exactly offer a shoulder to cry on, but he helped me work through it logically, which is what I think I really needed. He’s very stable.”

Clint nodded. As reckless as James could be, there *was* something stable about him. He didn’t change much. That was partially why Clint thought Brian relied on him in the way he did. Brian was always changing, always moving too fast. Reckless, but in a different way than James. James was like a car that was already going seventy five in a thirty zone and was steadily cranking the speed up until he couldn’t go any faster. Brian, on the other hand, was like a car trying to go directly from zero to one hundred in as little time as possible. They were both going to hit the curve eventually, but James might have gained enough control by that time to make it. Clint was worried that Brian would just crash and burn.

All of the sudden, the elevator door opened again. Out walked Tony, Bruce, Steve, and some person that Clint had never seen before in his life, setting him immediately on edge. The man – boy? – was fairly tall, slightly taller than Clint, but he was slender and had a lanky, awkward look about him. However, the way he held himself contradicted this. He was clearly confident, an air of annoyance

about him (impatience), but he appeared strangely unintimidated in a room full of superheroes, geniuses, and spies. He adjusted his almost comically overlarge glasses, but he didn't brush his dark, wavy bangs back from where they fell over his eyes. He looked like Clint imagined a young, serious Tony Stark might look, as strange as that sounded.

"I'm looking for 007," the boy said in crisp British accent, showing no discomfort in ordering them around. "I know he's here. It's rather urgent."

"He's on vacation," Will replied, looking unimpressed. "Find someone else to take care of whatever you need."

"He's not on authorized leave," the boy replied, blinking owlishly, unable to hide his mild surprise.

"He always takes Thanksgiving week off. He doesn't have to apply for leave anymore," Clint explained, brow furrowing a bit in confusion. "Who are you, anyway? You don't look like an agent."

"I'm Q," he answered simply, as if that would answer any and all questions. Or at least confuse them enough so that they'd stop interrogating him. "Now would you kindly take me to 007?"

Clint stared at him for a moment before saying, "No."

"Look, I *am* on a schedule here," Q replied, a bit of a snap in his voice. "What is so important that it can't wait?"

"Family crisis," Will answered this time, surprising Ethan who wasn't expecting him to, well, not exactly *lie* but...over-exaggerate.

"Excuse me," JARVIS' voice echoed through the room, "but I've finished running a precursory search, Mister Stark. Mister Q's DNA was not registered in any standard databases, although I was able to confirm his position as an MI6 operative with it. Do you wish for me to search further within their database to obtain more information?"

"Tony!" Steve exclaimed, sounding scandalized. "You can't just go hacking into private files! Hasn't Director Fury already given you a lecture about this? What if you were caught?"

"Technically," Tony started, "*I* wasn't the one doing the hacking – that was all JARVIS. I just told him to. Am I supposed to just let some random person waltz into my house looking for a superspy? I've seen the movie and while the superspy always gets away, the building he was in? Not so much. I mean, does he even *look* like a secret agent to you?"

Steve didn't have an answer to that last question, as he guiltily looked at Q.

"Oh! Hey!" Clint exclaimed suddenly. "I know who you are!"

"You do?" Q asked, blinking again.

"Well, kind of," Clint admitted. "I know that you do work with James, though. When we were talking on the phone a couple of months back he mentioned that he'd recently been saddled with a puppy named Spot. Of course, I thought he was talking about an *actual* dog, but..."

Q frowned. He really did look slightly like a puppy, now that Clint thought about it. Must be the floppy hair. Clint wondered if James used nicknames like that for his brothers when mentioning

them to his coworkers. He probably did, and they were probably really annoying. Clint smiled. As much as James pretended to constantly annoyed by them, he knew that they did mean *something* to him. Clint wasn't yet sure exactly where Q stood with James – it was always so hard to tell with him – but James obviously held some small smidgen of fondness for him. Well, either that or James *really* hated him. He gave nicknames to people he despised, too.

Just then, James reemerged from Brian's room, looking a little ruffled, but not injured and not cold. Cold was bad. Cold meant he was masking his emotions and that meant he was hurting – badly. Clint didn't like it when James became so robotic. He much preferred when James shot him his “You're an idiot” look or smiled ever so slightly when Clint did something ridiculous. Brian also appeared a few moments later, looking tired and still a little upset, but placated. He trudged over to the couch, squeezing in between Clint and Jim, leaning back and burying his face into the back of Clint's neck.

Normally Clint wasn't one for physical affection, but Brian was always cuddling up to people, so Clint didn't shove him away, despite his annoyance at Brian's warm breath tickling the back of his neck, making his hair stand on end. Jim glanced over at them, seeming to catch a glimpse of Clint's discomfort, causing him to reach out to pry Brian away, but James caught his eye before he could touch Brian, shooting him a warning look. James then turned to look at the newcomers, and seemed surprised to see Q standing in the entryway. Of course, Clint was just *assuming* that James was surprised – he had no outward tell.

“Q,” he greeted shortly. “What are you doing here?”

“I've been sent to retrieve you,” he replied, no longer bothering to pay attention to anyone else in the room. “You didn't apply for leave, and we have a high priority missing for you.”

James sighed in annoyance, striding over to seat himself gracefully in a rather stiff looking armchair before replying, “There should be records left by M in my file concerning holiday leave. She always knew I'd not be available for this one week.”

“Yes, well, in case you've forgotten, there's been some reshuffling in the program,” Q replied darkly, making no acknowledgement of the slight flicker in James' eyes that might as well have been a visible flinch at the mention of M's untimely death. “We have a new M now. He makes the rules.”

“If we're on the subject of rules, then why are *you* here?” James asked, his tone sharp and blue eyes piercing. “Surely Mallory knows better than to send a non-field agent out into the field. Continuing that, the fact that he should send the head of the entire Q branch, putting a valuable asset at such risk is, frankly, absolutely rash and idiotic.”

“Oh, but 007, surely *you* can protect me,” Q answered with a hint of sarcastic bite in his voice. “I was sent because I'm the only MI6 operative with even the slightest chance of entering Stark Tower without months of careful infiltration.”

“Seriously?” Jim blurted out, unable to censor himself in time. “I mean, you're a *spy* agency – isn't infiltration your whole point?”

Q looked at him with annoyance, shoving his large glasses further up his nose. “It's not that simple,” he said, a slightly offended huff in his tone. “We're currently on the seventy fifth floor of Stark Tower, which happens to built and owned by Stark Industries: the most advanced electronics corporation in the world. While it may be currently expanding into alternative energy sources, it

was formerly the most prominent weapons manufacturer in the world, and is still the top of the line in terms of security systems. We're currently at the Mecca of Stark technological innovation – the center of *world* technological innovation. How easy do you think it would be to bypass this building's security measures?"

"Lots of high security facilities use Stark tech," Ethan butted in, "but IMF is still able to infiltrate. Granted, Benji is one of our best tech agents, but some good old fashioned legwork also tends to be required."

"Ethan," Benji interrupted as Q opened his mouth to reply, "you're right that a lot of places use Stark tech, but the amount of places that use it to its full capabilities is actually pretty small. Plus, who knows what Stark's equipped this place with that's not yet – or maybe never will be – on the market?"

Q turned his gaze to Benji now, a thoughtful look on his face. "Who did you say you were, again?" he asked, his eyes flickering over the IMF agent, clearly trying to place him.

"Benji Dunn," Benji replied, grinning. "IMF technical field agent."

"You're British," Q stated, contemplating Benji's accent. "You applied to MI6 five years ago, didn't you? As I've recently become the new head of the Q division, I've been reevaluating all prospective Q branch operatives. Your name came up as accepted some time ago, but for some reason there was never any confirmation of your reply."

Benji looked surprised at this proclamation, clearly not expecting Q's reply. "Um, yeah. I did apply to MI6 first, but I never got a confirmation or denial. I was contacted by the IMF a month later and decided to join them instead."

Q let out a put-upon sigh, frustrated by whoever the former head of Q branch was. "I'm going to have to *completely* retrain the entire administration, aren't I?"

"Exactly," James cut in, looking bored. (He always looked unimpressed, but it took some effort for him to look *bored*.) "Even if I had filed for leave, you'd have never gotten the paperwork."

"Wait – stop for one second," Jane cut in. "Back to the infiltration thing – how did you get in here? Because it really doesn't look like you've messed with any of the security technology."

"I didn't," Q answered. "Unlike some other paranoid operatives I have been acquainted with, I still understand the significance of the front door."

Everyone stared at him. A few of the spies in the room – Clint, Will, Ethan, Benji, and Jane – looked a little embarrassed at this proclamation. Front door wasn't exactly their entrance of choice, as easily demonstrated by Clint's recent scaling of the side of Stark Tower, using the large windows and exits and entrances. Air vents had been his next choice. Doors weren't exactly his style....

"I still have to take you back in," Q continued, turning back to James. "Stop being so difficult."

"I cut my last vacation short, too, to come back and help you incompetents," James shot back dryly. "I'm taking my time, this time."

"Your last 'vacation' was you getting shot on a mission and pretending you were dead," Q pointed out. "This is different. We need your skill set, 007."

“Well, it looks like I have only one option, then,” James replied nonchalantly. “I’m holding you captive here until the end of the holiday.”

“What?” Q said after a moment, blinking owlishly again. “You can’t do that.”

“And why not?” James asked, giving Q a slightly disdainful look. “If I’m holding the head of Q branch hostage, they’ll be sure to give me my vacation time. They can’t apprehend me, because, as you yourself said, they can’t sacrifice the manpower and resources to infiltrate Stark Tower without considerable time and effort. It should also teach them to not interrupt me during Thanksgiving week.”

Q opened his mouth to retort, however he was once again interrupted by JARVIS’ polite voice flowing over the building’s communication system.

“Excuse me, but there appear to be more guests waiting in the lobby,” the AI said, easily cutting into the conversation. “One of them matches your description of your older brother, Doctor John Watson. I have not yet been able to identify the other man with him, however.”

“John Watson?” Q said, a surprised look reappearing on his face. “What is *he* doing here?”

“He’s our brother,” Will supplied, standing up from the couch, stretching out his back before starting to move over towards the elevator.

“How do *you* know about him?” Clint asked, suspicious, still not willing to trust Q, despite his relatively harmless and boyish appearance. “John isn’t involved in any intelligence work.”

“Oh, well, he was once,” Q replied. “In Afghanistan – a certain mission, you see. That’s not actually where I know about him from, though. My older brother is a...*friend* of his - ”

Q suddenly cut himself off, eyes widening comically and his mouth hanging open from where it had planned on forming its next syllable before it had been abruptly stopped. It wasn’t quite the same owlish look as before, despite the wide eyes, but captured a greater picture of dumbstruck realization and maybe even a hint of panic. It was not an expression that Clint was comfortable with, on anyone at anytime. It usually ended badly for him. No, actually, it *always* ended badly for him. Period.

“Who did you say was with Doctor Watson?” Q asked JARVIS quickly, already making his way over to the elevator, following Will and causing many of the other people in the room to tense and stand up, walking after him. “Describe him to me. Tall? Pale? Dark, curly hair? Wearing a dark blue, cashmere scarf?”

“Yes, Mister Q. He fits all aspects of your description,” the AI replied after a moment. “Doctor Watson has also just referred to him as ‘Sherlock’.”

“Oh, damn it all,” Q swore, crossing his arms over his chest in a reflection of his frustration.

“What is it?” James asked, all seriousness and paranoia now. “Is this man a threat?”

“Not unless you’re a serial killer,” Q muttered. “He’s my older brother.”

“If he’s just your older brother than why are you so upset?” Clint asked, looking over at Q. “Do you guys have a bad relationship or something?”

“No, our relationship is fine,” Q replied curtly.

“Then I don’t see what your problem is,” Clint said, questioning further even if his words were phrased as a statement. “Did you two get in an argument? Because siblings can be surprisingly forgiving if you give them a chance.”

“Yes, well, I don’t suppose you’ve ever had to deal with facing your brothers after enabling a cyber terrorist and international criminal to take over your computer, allowing him to hack MI6 twice within a week and letting him escape so he could wreck havoc on London and kill the head of MI6,” Q answered bitterly. “Somehow, I doubt that my brothers would take kindly to such a failure.”

Clint stood, frozen, listening. For a moment he forgot to breathe. He did not allow his body to reveal how he felt upon hearing Q’s proclamation, how his stomach clenched uncomfortably and his throat tightened, making him want to swallow. Clint shut down quickly, his eyes blank, although his mind was anything but. It was strange to hear Q say those words; strange how close to home they hit. There were eerie similarities to the situations that Clint could not deny. Of course, there were plenty of major differences, too. Q had, after all, not directly killed anyone. Not like Clint, whose true-flying arrows met hearts and eye sockets with deadly accuracy.

Clint jumped slightly as he was pulled back out of his thoughts by a sure hand on his right shoulder, head jerking around to see Bruce looking at him with concern and maybe a hint of pity, or compassion maybe. Clint blinked, not quickly but not slowly, looking away from Bruce now, using the sensation of the scientist’s hand on his shoulder to ground himself again, the slightly clammy feel of it making him shiver a little before he shrugged it off again, resisting the urge to scratch at the spot where Bruce’s hand had been once it was gone.

“Can’t say I do,” he replied, his voice sounding thick and false to his ears. “I’m not really the most tech savvy of people.”

Q’s eyes flickered back over to him for a second, studying Clint carefully, but making no comment. His voice must have given him away somewhat. Just then, the elevator doors opened and Q looked away again as everyone piled into the, surprisingly roomy, elevator, although it was still a bit of a tight squeeze with twelve people. No one spoke during the long elevator ride down to the first floor, although Brian did squirm through the crowd to move next to Clint, carefully interlocking their fingers. Clint squeezed Brian’s hand in reassurance and Brian let go again, letting his hand fall to his side, but his steady presence never left.

By the time they reached the ground floor, everyone was fidgety and restless, trying not to jab each other with all the extra elbows they seemed to have accumulated. Once the doors opened, everyone flowed out like a tidal wave. Clint hoped that no one would get trampled. When he looked around for John, his eyes were immediately drawn to a rather comical scene. The friend that John had brought along (“Sherlock”) was being given a friendly slap on the back by an enthusiastic Thor. He looked a little bewildered. And perhaps in pain, as Thor still seemed to remain oblivious to his own strength sometimes. John was clearly trying not to laugh as he continued to converse with Thor.

Just then, John and his friend looked over at where they were all coming out of the elevator. John’s face lit up and his smile widened. Sherlock’s frown grew deeper and his eyes widened. Q seemed to be doing his best to disappear, and Clint could almost swear it looked like he was shrinking. However, Sherlock’s eyes zeroed in directly on Q, shock clear on his face, followed by an intense, analytical look, followed by realization. All of this happened in under half a minute. There’s *no*

way that someone could figure out the situation that quickly. He probably jumped to the wrong conclusion.

On the other hand, John *had* said that his flat-mate was brilliant.

“Quillan,” Sherlock greeted, nodding at his younger brother.

“Quillan?” Brian asked, incredulous, but trying to hold in his laughter. “Your name is actually ‘Quillan’?”

“If it puts it into perspective, my brothers are named Sherlock and Mycroft,” Q, now dubbed ‘Quillan’, muttered, clearly having had this conversation before. “Our parents preferred... *traditional* names.”

“I rather think that ‘Quillan’ suits you,” James said, amusement in his tone. “Gaelic. It means ‘cub’.”

Q shot him an indignant look. “Next time you come asking for an exploding pen, I’ll give you one that explodes in your face,” he muttered, not meaning for anyone else to hear. Of course, he had no such luck, considering who was in the vicinity.

Brain began snickering and James only looked more amused than before. Clint was struggling not to roll his eyes and Jim was also clearly trying not to laugh. Benji looked like he wanted to ask how one would make an exploding pen and Ethan also looked like he was interested in the answer – he clearly wanted one himself. Well, not one that would blow up in his face, but, you know, *exploding pen*. Jane and Bruce seemed to be in the same state of mind as Clint: exasperatedly fond. Tony had a mischievous look on his face and Steve looked worried.

That was when Thor decided to interrupt. “My noble SHIELD brothers!” he boomed, bounding over to them and pulling Sherlock along with him, John trailing behind and looking evilly entertained. “I have just made acquaintance with the distinguished Warrior Healer and his just Companion! Why did you tell us that your brother was the lover of one of Lady Vör’s gifted!”

“For the last time, it’s not *magic*,” Sherlock hissed, clearly fed up with Thor, although the god didn’t seem to notice. “It’s *science*. *Deduction*.”

“Who’s ‘Vör?’” Benji interrupted, curious.

“The Norse god of wisdom,” Will answered automatically.

“Lady Vör is a most knowing person,” Thor agreed, nodding, grin on his face still wide and just the wrong side of blinding. “One cannot conceal anything from her all seeing eyes. When I was still small she always knew when Brother and I had been involved in such childish mischief.”

“I don’t care about any Scandinavian deity,” Sherlock complained, finally managing to get Thor’s arm off of its perch on his shoulders. “I have spent years meticulously training my mind to catalogue and analyze significant details. This ‘Lady Vör’ is of no consequence to my deductive abilities.”

“Sherlock, do you honestly think you’re going to win this argument?” John asked, trying not to laugh as he moved over to stand next to his friend, nodding to Jim who was on his other side. “Also, I’m not his ‘lover’.”

“If this *imbecile* bothered to listen to my logic - ” Sherlock started but was cut off as three enthusiastic sextuplets barreled into John, completely engulfing the smaller man. John somehow managed to stay upright, but that probably had more to do with the three sets of arms wrapped around him than his own upright stability. James stood off to the side slightly but smiled when John made eye contact through the sea of Barton brothers.

“Okay, okay,” John laughed, starting to pry them off. “Let me breathe.”

His three younger brother reluctantly let go, giving John enough space to straighten out his sweater and wipe off the imaginary dust from it.

“Nice to see all of you again, Clint, Brian, Will,” he said happily, before turning to James. “You, on the other hand, have some explaining to do. About the whole dying thing.”

The small smile on James’ face was clearly false now. Clint’s eyes flickered between his two older brothers. He was kind tempted to let John continue. He would probably feel better after watching John berate James for the stunt he pulled, but, on the other hand, he knew that afterwards he’d end up feeling guilty, no matter how much James deserved a tongue lashing. Plus, this wasn’t something they needed to do in public. He didn’t like other people seeing his brothers fighting. It felt too private. That may seem a bit silly, everyone knew that every family has their problems, but it still felt like the outsiders who even just glanced over at them while they argued were intruding on something intimate.

“John,” Clint started, drawing his brother’s attention, “don’t worry about it for now. We can discuss this later. Brian’s already chewed him out about it, anyway.”

John looked a little reluctant to drop the subject, but he sighed and moved onto a different topic, a small grin crossing his face as he remembered something.

“So, you’re Sherlock’s brother?” he said, turning to Quillan, looking polite and innocent. He wasn’t. “Small world, isn’t it? I’ve met Mycroft before, but I’m afraid Sherlock’s never bothered to mention you before.”

“Yes, well,” Q began, trying to cover up how uncomfortable he was. “I’ve been a bit busy. With work, that is. I work for MI6.”

“A minor position?” John hazarded, thinking of Mycroft.

“Not at all,” Quillan replied, looking a little indignant, like Sherlock when someone assumed he wasn’t as brilliant as he said he was. “I’m not a snake like *Mycroft*. I can pull strings just as well from a major position as I can from a minor position.”

“Yep, he’s related to you,” John said, turning to look up at Sherlock, amusement in his expression. “Probably more closely to you than to Mycroft.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. John grinned.

Brian opened his mouth to interject, probably something snarky, but was cut off by a yell from over near the lobby’s entrance. Everyone turned to see what the commotion was and were greeted with an interesting sight. As in, another Barton clone had evidently just tackled someone in front of the building. A few moments later a woman with long auburn hair came running up to them and started yelling something at the sextuplet.

Clint jogged over to the glass doors, the others walking behind him, pushing them open and going to see what all the commotion was about. Jason – because that’s who it was – was half listening to the woman’s rant as he got off of the man he had just tackled, but he didn’t let go, fishing around his pockets for a pair of handcuffs.

“Casey, rule number one,” Jason said, tightening his grip on the man as he tried to wriggle free, “if someone is running and constantly checking behind them, assume they’re a criminal. Tackle first and ask questions later.”

The woman sighed. “I’m sorry about my boneheaded partner,” she said to the man Jason had tackled. “He can be kind of...*paranoid* someti - ”

However, she was cut off mid word as a man wearing a rumpled suit and a crooked tie rounded to corner at top speed, skidding to a halt as he caught sight of Jason restraining the other man. His eyes widened and he stuttered, shocked and out of breath, “Tha-that’s the man who stole my wallet!”

Jason smirked. The woman frowned.

“Come on Casey. Grab the man’s wallet for him,” Jason said as the man he was restraining tried to stomp on his foot. “I don’t have my cuffs with me, but I won’t let him deck you.”

The woman’s frown turned into a scowl, but she marched over and dug around in the man’s pockets (perhaps with more force than strictly necessary) before coming up with a simple, black leather wallet. She flipped it open, scanning the contents, pulling out the driver’s license and holding it up to compare to the man in the rumpled suit before replacing it and handing the wallet over to him.

“You know, someday that’s not going to work for you and you’ll get sued,” she said, pulling out her phone to call the local police to pick up the thief. “Or you’ll get killed by the person he’s running away from. One of the two.”

Jason rolled his eyes and was about to respond, but he stopped when he caught sight of Clint. A grin broke out on his face and he probably would have waved to Clint if his hands weren’t already occupied. His partner (or, at least, that’s who Clint was assuming she was) turned to try and figure out what he was smiling at. She was apparently not prepared for what she saw.

“There are two of you. Why are there two of you?” she asked, turning back to Jason after seeing Clint. “You didn’t drug my coffee did you? Because there is something fundamentally wrong with forcing two of you on the world.”

“You didn’t show her the PowerPoint?” Clint asked, walking over to them.

“Didn’t get around to it,” Jason replied and his partner glanced warily between the two. “I didn’t know I was bringing her over until a couple of hours ago.”

“When you said we were going to visit your brothers I didn’t think you meant your *twin*,” the woman groaned. “Please tell me he’s better behaved than you.”

“Oh, is this Allison?” Clint asked, looking at the woman again and extending his hand in greeting. “I’m Clint.”

“No, I’m Casey. Casey Shraeger,” the woman said, but she accepted his offered hand anyway. “We’re partners.”

That was when everyone else walked outside. Casey’s expression became more and more shocked looking as Will and then Brian came into view. Her eyes lingered on Brian’s multiple piercings and tattoo. She looked like a woman waiting for the end of the world, or maybe something worse. She became a little confused, though, as her eyes rested on Brian’s completely smudged eyeliner. It looked like something clicked then, and Casey’s every muscle seemed to relax in relief.

“You didn’t tell me your brother was on the vice squad,” she said, turning to Jason again.

“That’s because he isn’t,” Jason deadpanned, giving Brian a strange look. “He’s SWAT.”

Casey looked concerned again.

Brian sighed, opening his mouth to explain for what felt like the hundredth time, “I’m not vice, I’m not a hooker, and I don’t like eyeliner. I lost a bet. Can we drop the subject now? I’m tired of explaining this to people. I’m Brian, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” Casey replied with a tentative smile. “Jason, how many brothers did you say you have?”

“Seven,” Jason answered, still holding onto the criminal. He was getting more and more tempted to just knock the guy out. “Can you finish calling the police now?”

Casey didn’t even bother to try and hide the horror in her expression, before she grabbed her phone again and tried to distract herself with calling the district’s police. Was this the seventeenth precinct? Or was it the eighteenth? She couldn’t remember.

“I can help you with him if you’re tired of standing here,” a voice broke in from behind Jason and Clint. Jason flinched and Clint nearly did, but he managed to control his body’s automatic reaction. He did spin around, though, coming face to face with Natasha. Normally he was able to detect when she was coming (after years of being startled out of his skin when she snuck up on him) but he hadn’t noticed she was there at all this time.

It was probably because he was with his brothers. No matter how hard he tried to stay alert when his brothers were around, he always ended up relaxing. Most people would tell him that that was a good thing, being able to relax, but Natasha exploited it ruthlessly for her own amusement. Clint had yet to figure out if it was just her personality or if it was due to some natural sadistic streak in all Russians.

It was probably just Natasha.

A part of him did enjoy relaxing, though, no matter how much he regretted it when Natasha decided to toy with him. He enjoyed the feeling of security he gained when around his brothers. It wasn’t even connected to physical contact or anything, it was just, well, their *presence*. Knowing that he was in a room full of highly trained fighters who actually gave a shit about him. It typically wasn’t something he could indulge in, even before with Natasha. He cared for her and he knew that at least a little part of her cared for him, but it was only recently that he’d been able to really let loose, at least a little bit, around her. He was also astounded at how he was beginning to feel safe around the other Avengers. It was strange, but in a good way, he supposed.

And then, of course, there was Phil. Coulson, rather. He shouldn't be calling him "Phil" – he really shouldn't. Agent Coulson. But then, Clint had never been very good at doing what he was supposed to do. Phil had actually told him such before, but in a joking sort of way. Coulson. It should be *Coulson*, not Phil. The fact that he called him "Phil" in his mind instead of "Coulson" just went to show how comfortable he'd become with Phil. He wasn't sure when, exactly, it had happened, but it had. Clint doesn't know if he likes it or not.

"Hey, space cadet," Jason said, looking at Clint pointedly and snapping him out of his thoughts. "You got something on your mind that you'd like to share with the class?"

"I know you're a little behind the curve, Jason, but show and tell ended years ago," Will replied for Clint, snappy as always. "Nice to see you again, by the way."

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to knock him out," Natasha repeated, eying the wallet thief who was somehow still struggling against Jason. You'd think he'd get the hint and just stop trying to escape by now. "I can make it so that it doesn't even leave a mark."

"So can I," another voice cut in, from behind Clint again. This time Clint had absolutely no urge to flinch. Instead, he smiled. "Although it might not be the best idea with the crowd we're gathering out here."

Clint spun around to see Aaron standing behind him, looking completely comfortable standing there, as if he was wondering when someone would finally notice him. Marta was behind him, holding back her laughter as many of the others seemed to be wondering where exactly they came from. Sometimes it was really annoying to be friends with spies.

"Hey," Aaron said in greeting.

Everyone was finally here. Let the chaos begin.

Chapter 3: And Maybe A Few More

Chapter Summary

Chapter Warnings: Jason's cooking? Cliche fluff? Clint and Phil being oblivious idiots? Typos due to my laziness?

Chapter Notes

A few under appreciated youtube videos for a few of the Renner characters:

"Reaching as I Fall" Hawkeye & Trickshot: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUDijQ2KO7k>
- Rather dark representation of Clint and Barney's relationship. Uses clips from other Renner movies to depict Hawkeye, too.

Anything I Want: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62GPclXygHs>
- Will, Aaron, and James! All in one video!

T.H.L.: Into the fire: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKw7OiOV0lc>
- William James (the Hurt Locker). He hasn't appeared yet in the fic, but he will! Really, *really* awesome vid!

I can't miss: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AG2pmxx9MQ>
- Whoot! Hawkeye!

BRIAN GAMBLE: I Can Do Anything: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIwzXs-opKg>
- What it says on the tin (Brian). Really really cool, though. Awesome editing and perfect song.

The Bourne Legacy / Aaron Cross: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1ocQJgfIRg>
- Again, what it says on the tin.

TBL: Radioactive: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5CXn858tHI>
- More Aaron. Again, awesome editing.

Phil Coulson, for the first time in the past four years, had a day off. And he had no clue what to do. He didn't even *want* a day off! It was more of a forced leave, than anything. Apparently, according to SHIELD regulations, an employee couldn't work without vacation time for more than three and a half consecutive years. Phil had only been able to hold out for an extra half a year, and that was just because of the recent discovery of aliens. Well, *discovery* wasn't exactly the right word, as SHIELD had already known about aliens, they just hadn't quite met them yet. However, the situation was now (relatively) under control, what with the Avengers and all. Fury was now relaxed enough to notice that Coulson was over the three and a half year mark.

And of course, right then, was when all of the Avengers decided to take the week off. So now Phil was being forced to take an *entire week* off. So far he had done as much online paperwork as physically possible before his SHIELD password was blocked and he could no longer sign into his account. He still had managed to squirrel away some paper forms, though, but he'd worked through all of those in under two hours. So now he had absolutely nothing to do.

Well, except drop off some forms, but... Phil Coulson wasn't anxious. Phil Coulson didn't *do* anxious. He was just...*uncomfortable* around Clint sometimes. This, of course, had nothing to do with how attractive/adorable/amazing Clint was, and it *certainly* didn't have anything to do with his non-existent urge to wrap his arms around Clint and protect him from the world. Not at all. It had nothing to do with the fact that the forms he needed to drop off were for Clint.

Phil sighed. He'd already driven over to Avengers Tower and was currently parked on the street in front of the large building. He hadn't yet gotten out of his car, or taken the keys out of the ignition, so he still could back out of this and give Clint the forms later, after the break when it'd be so much easier for him to hide behind his eternally professional mask. It was much easier to pretend his heart didn't skip a beat when Clint smiled when he was busy giving instructions to five other superheroes and helping to take out whatever supervillain was trying to take over the world that week.

Phil looked up as someone knocked on the window of his car door, slightly startled and already berating himself for not being completely alert. His eyes were met with the image of Happy Hogan, Stark's chauffeur and bodyguard. Phil rolled down the window, going into hyper alert mode, set off by the slightly confused and concerned look on Happy's face.

"Yes?" he asked, perfectly calm, although he was scanning the surrounding area. He did recall there being a call to the police earlier that morning... "Has something come up?"

"Ah, no," Happy answered. "I was just wondering if there was a particular reason you've been sitting in your car for the past fifteen minutes...?"

"Just taking a call from SHIELD," Phil answered quickly. "I was just about to head inside. I have some paperwork to pass on."

"Oh," Happy replied. "I'll leave you to it, then. I believe they're all up in the kitchen on level seventy six."

"Thanks," Phil said, smile feeling forced, but he knew his acting was good enough that it didn't show. He rolled the window back up as Happy jogged back over to the Tower, disappearing off to the side behind the glass doors. Phil paused for one more moment before opening the car door and stepping outside, grabbing his briefcase out of the back seat. He knew that there was no way to avoid going to see the Avengers now that he had seen Happy. They'd probably panic if they were expecting him and he never showed up, which, he supposed, when working for an organization such as SHIELD was a good thing, but their hovering could be a little annoying at times.

(Not that he didn't love hovering, because he really did. He could admit it to himself. He'd never admit it to anyone else, though.)

Maybe he could just give the documents to Steve or Bruce. They'd make sure the documents got to Clint, and he could always make some excuse about not being able to give them to Clint himself because of his workload... On the other hand, a slightly masochistic part of him wanted to see Clint on his day off. He couldn't say he'd never daydreamed about it – having a vacation day with just

Clint and himself, waking up with Clint and then getting to spend the entire day together, doing whatever they pleased. It was completely unrealistic and unprofessional, but it was his guilty pleasure. Plus, he probably wouldn't be able to avoid Clint now even if he tried – Happy *had* said that everyone was together in the kitchen.

Might as well take the plunge, Phil thought as he walked through the glass doors into the lobby of Stark Tower and over to the elevators. He pressed the shiny new “up” button and heard the soft “ping!” signaling the opening of an elevator almost instantly. There was no one else in the elevator that he could see, but he stepped in cautiously anyways; you knew as a SHIELD agent to always be prepared. He pressed the button for the seventy sixth level and it lit up with a soft yellow glow. He stood patiently as the elevator glided into motion, absentmindedly wondering how Stark managed to make an elevator that moved so smoothly, unlike the old elevators in SHIELD headquarters that always seemed to be jerking to a stop or start.

Phil strode out of the elevator as it gently stopped, making his way over to the kitchen (he'd been inside only once before, when Tony had given him the initial tour, but he was very good at remembering the layout of buildings). He could hear laughter flowing out of the room, followed by what seemed to be a yelp of protest, followed by more laughter. He was a little disconcerted to find that he couldn't pick Clint's voice out of the cacophony and he quickly knocked on the kitchen door.

He waited patiently as he heard a pair of feet tap over the kitchen floor over to the door. The door swung inwards and revealed Clint, his face flushed with happiness and powdered sugar dusting his cheeks and the tip of his nose. (There was also some on his neck and the top of his left ear. Phil wasn't quite sure how one could manage to get powdered sugar there.)

“Agent Coulson!” Clint exclaimed, surprise and something else, anxiety maybe, in his voice. “Uh hey. What's up?”

Phil had originally planned on just shoving the paperwork into Clint's hands, saying a few short words, and then leaving, but his brain had momentarily short circuited and the words that came out of his mouth weren't exactly what he'd been planning on.

“I ran out of paperwork,” he blurted (or, well, the Coulson equivalent of blurting. It came out sounding bored and slightly irritated.)

“You ran out of paperwork?” Clint asked incredulously, clearly trying not to laugh. “I didn't think that was possible. Doesn't SHIELD have an endless supply of paperwork?”

“Well, *you* still have paperwork,” Phil said blandly, indicating the manila folder tucked under his arm. “I'm on forced leave, though.”

“You mean vacation?” Clint asked, amused.

If Coulson was the type of person to roll his eyes, he would have right then. As it was, he wouldn't really have had the chance, as the door to the kitchen was suddenly flung open, another man now occupying the other half of the entrance.

“Hey, Clint, you should invite your friend in already,” the other person said, slinging an arm around Clint. “All of us are dying to know who you're chatting with out here.”

Phil's brain short circuited again. There were two Clint Bartons.

This was not how Clint wanted Phil to meet his family. At all. They'd all been in the house for only a couple of hours now and everyone was either tired (John, Will, and James) or giddy (Brian, Jason, and Aaron). They were baking Russian tea cakes due to a request from Natasha – her birthday had been a couple of weeks prior – and Clint was, of course, a mess. His hair was everywhere from when Jason had decided to ruffle it, probably smearing cookie dough into his hair at the same time. There was also powdered sugar all over his face from when he tried to steal a cookie that Aaron had just finished powdering, getting no cookie and a handful of sugar to the face for his troubles. He'd managed to wipe most of it off, but going by Aaron's amused expression he wasn't entirely successful.

Of course, Clint couldn't say that he'd never imagined Phil in the kitchen with him, maybe even licking stray bits of sugar off his lips. Which, really, only made this more awkward. The look that Brian was currently giving Phil wasn't helping much either, or, rather, Brian's whole *presence* wasn't making the situation any better. Like with Steve earlier, Brian wasn't exactly the first family member Clint wanted any of his friends meeting. He felt guilty at that thought – it really wasn't fair to Brian. He was a nice guy and a good friend once you got to know him...he just didn't always make a very good first impression. Especially when it was someone like Phil. Of course, Phil had dealt with Clint surprisingly well...

A little part of Clint tried telling him that it was better for Phil to meet someone like Brian first instead of, say, Will, because then maybe he'd stay away and not discover how much better Clint's siblings were than him. Then again, Phil did always seem to have a way of seeing more in people than anyone else did, so maybe he didn't need to be around the others for a long period of time to tell that Clint wasn't as special as he sometimes liked to pretend and imagine he was. As he sometimes liked to image that *Phil* thought he was.

But, well, Brian had just invited Phil into the kitchen – into the middle of his family chaos. It wasn't very easy to read Phil's expression as he took in the scene playing out in the kitchen with all the Barton brothers, but Clint had known Phil long enough to interpret his small tells. The slightly increased length between blinks indicated surprise, while his minutely raised eyebrows conveyed curiosity. A moment later, however, a small smile tugged at Phil's lips. Clint's heart sank as he identified that expression – fond recognition.

"Captain Watson," Phil said, his voice pleasantly surprised as he greeted the former army doctor. "I wasn't expecting to see you again in New York, much less Stark Tower."

"So we meet again, 'Agent'," John replied, a grin spreading over his own face. "I don't suppose I'd be able to accurately tack a 'Coulson' onto that now, would I?"

"Oh?" Coulson replied, questioning.

"I've heard plenty about you from Clint, of course," John clarified, his words causing Phil to glance over at Clint.

"How...?" Clint started, searching for some explanation to how his older brother and his handler seemed to know each other already. They'd never run into John on any missions...

"Afghanistan," a crisp, slightly aloof sounding British voice cut in, causing Clint's eyes to shift from Phil to John's flat-mate, Sherlock.

“Yes. And?” John said, also turning to Sherlock, urging him to continue, although Clint wasn’t quite sure what there was to continue.

“Your third or fourth tour of duty, judging by your reaction time. You didn’t recognize him until you actually saw him and just hearing his voice through the door wasn’t enough to trigger any significant recognition in you, so a while ago, but not *too* long ago,” Sherlock rattled off, eyes locked onto John the entire time, and a hint of eager amusement in his expression. “He addressed you as ‘Captain’ and he clearly has some residual military bearing, however it’s not prominent enough that he was a fellow soldier in the army at the time of your service.”

His eyes flicked over to Phil, taking a few short moments to scan over him, completely analyzing any and all of his characteristics.

“Not standard military, though, when he was in the armed forces. Some sort of special forces, judging by his current occupation. So, how would you have met an ex-special forces American?” Sherlock asked, looking back at John, although it was obviously rhetorical. “It’s due to his current occupation. There’s a significant writing callus on his right hand, however he’s in impeccable shape. You’ve already told me that he works for an espionage organization, and although to the casual observer his manner screams ‘bureaucrat’ he clearly is not. He’s already assessed the threat level each of us pose.

“So, also a field agent. However, the writing callus implies paperwork, therefore he’s not a standard asset, but probably a senior officer or handler. The fact that his hands show evidence of writing, though, instead of his fingertips showing wear from typing, means that he’s handling highly classified information. No espionage agency worth its salt would be so careless as to put it out on a network that has even the most remote possibility of being hacked.

“So,” Sherlock said, locking eyes with John, a slightly smug smile on his face. “Did he play well with old England’s marginally Secret Service?”

“What. The. Fuck.” Brian said, effectively summing up everyone else’s thought processes.

“What did I miss?” Sherlock asked, ignoring Brian and turning to Phil.

“Well, I’m not officially a field agent at the moment,” Phil replied, appearing slightly unnerved but at the same time intrigued.

“Of course you’re not!” Sherlock exclaimed, eyes darting to the area right over Phil’s heart. “You’ve been recovering from a near fatal injury for...six months.”

“Three, actually,” Tony piped in, staring eagerly at Sherlock, as if he wanted to take him apart and put him back together again, after figuring out what his programming looked like. “But, you know, that’s a perfectly logical conclusion if you don’t know about all of the alien magic mumbo jumbo that we used on him.”

Sherlock looked like he was about to say something more, but he was cut off by a high pitched beeping. Clint used the distraction to make himself look busy, going over to the oven to pull out another now finished tray of Russian tea cakes. He was so focused on *not* focusing on Phil Coulson that he nearly grabbed the hot cookie sheet out of the oven without any oven mitts. Thankfully, someone had been paying attention to him, and Aaron cut in front of him, whisking the tray out of the oven before Clint’s hands could touch it.

“Hey, scatterbrain,” he said, knocking Clint lightly on the back of the head with his free hand. “I know we’re all a bit stunned by John’s boyfriend here, but don’t hurt yourself. You’re the one who works with an alien, a giant green rage monster, a genius, a super solider, and the scariest woman I’ve ever met. Aren’t you used to this sort of thing by now?”

“Shut up,” Clint grumbled, retaliating by stealing a cookie off the tray Aaron was still carrying, taking a large bite before sticking his tongue out at Aaron.

“And you wonder why you don’t have a boyfriend,” Jason said pointedly but a little teasingly, sidling up next to Clint, half contradicting his own words by stealing a cookie from the tray for himself.

Clint pointedly ignored him, instead trying to snatch another cookie, only to have his hand lightly slapped away by Aaron. Jason tried to grab another while Aaron was distracted by Clint, but he was no more successful, earning himself a fond glare from his brother.

“Mmmm, these smell great,” Marta said, creeping up behind Aaron and looping her arm around Aaron’s free one. “Do you mind if I steal one?”

“Not at all,” Aaron replied, smiling.

“Hey! No playing favorites,” Clint whined, which only made Aaron and Marta grin cheekily before Aaron leaned down to peck Marta lightly on the lips.

“I can’t help it that Marta’s better at distracting me than you are,” Aaron said, a small grin on his face. “If you want to steal more cookies then you’re going to have to try harder. No kissing me though,” he added on, teasing. “Only Marta gets that privilege.”

Clint was about to say something more, only to realize that the cookie tray was missing five more tea cakes than it was before. He jerked his head up, his eyes immediately falling on Natasha, who was delicately nibbling a cookie, doing her best impression of “innocent” (which, admittedly, was pretty convincing. It was a good thing he knew Natasha well). His eyes slid off her, a slightly exasperated smile on his face. However, that smile dissipated quickly as he laid eyes on John and Phil chatting away happily, Sherlock hovering around (over) John.

This was...kind of worse than he’d imagined, actually. If Phil had attached himself to Will or Jason or one of the other sextuplets, then Clint might be able to comfort himself a tiny bit with the fact that therefore Phil was at least a little attracted to him, but instead he was all over John, who was probably the brother he looked the *least* like. Well, Clint was a little bit comforted by the way that Sherlock was hovering around John, a touch on the possessive side. Then again, Phil and John seemed to be getting along really well...

“Hey,” Will’s voice broke into Clint’s thoughts. “If you guys are going to eat up all of the cookies you should at least put the powdered sugar on them first!”

“Are you sure there’s any left?” Tony cut in, snickering. “I’m pretty sure you and Clint have used up all of it on your faces.”

Clint knew that he hadn’t managed to get all the powdered sugar off his face, but there was no way he could have as much on his face as *Will* did. Seriously, Will was *covered* in the stuff! Not that it was his fault – it was technically Q’s. (Quillan. Whatever.) Or, well, the fault of whoever had forgotten a spoon in the middle of the kitchen floor. (Seriously. Why was there a spoon lying in the

middle of the floor?) Q had been carrying a bowl of powdered sugar and had tripped on the spoon. He had initially managed to catch himself, but then Ethan had elbowed Will (accidentally! This kitchen was far too small for so many people...), who had stumbled backwards slightly – directly into Q and the powdered sugar. Q had gotten the worst of it and had had to retreat upstairs to shower and change, but Will had gotten fairly...*powdered* too.

Clint was just glad that it wasn't Brian or Tony who had gotten doused – then they'd *all* be covered in the stuff! Clint's eyes flicked over to where Phil was chatting with John and was surprised to find his handler looking directly at him, a slightly concerned look on his face. Clint froze for a split second before forcing a cocky grin on his face, winking at him before leaning over Will's shoulder and quickly snatching up a cookie that his brother had just finished powdering. Will shot him a disgruntled look, but just rolled his eyes, moving a little to the side so that Clint would have room to squeeze in next to him around the table.

Clint found himself squished between Will and Steve. On Steve's other side was Tony, who had apparently given up on the cookie making in favor of writing complex formulas in the powdered sugar left on the counter. Bruce was next to him and was valiantly trying to focus on the cookies, but he would occasionally pause to correct something in Tony's calculations. Thor appeared to be enjoying himself immensely, if the amount of sugar he was drowning his cookies with was any indication. Natasha's cookies, on the other hand, looked too perfect to eat. She hadn't really said anything thus far, but she had a little happy glow around her.

Will, on the other hand, seemed to be getting more and more frustrated at the cookies. Or, rather, at the powdered sugar. Clint hadn't thought that it was possible for Will to get any more powdered sugar on him, but apparently he was wrong. Benji and Jane were clearly amused and Ethan looked positively *enamored*. Clint would *totally* have to tease Will about this later.

Jason and Brian were chatting quietly as they dutifully powdered cookies. That alone set Clint on edge. Those two conspiring together was never good, and the two of them conspiring together *quietly* was *bad*. There better not be any dye involved again. Jason's partner, Casey, was off to the side with Jim, making the standard small talk. Casey had taken the news (about Jason's many brothers) surprisingly well after the initial shock wore off. She still seemed to be keeping a close eye on Brian, but he suspected she'd figure out he was relatively harmless eventually. Well, unless Jason and Brian pulled some stupid prank again.

James was talking with Marta, but Aaron was keeping a close eye on them, giving James a warning look whenever he got a little too friendly. Not that James could really help it. Clint was pretty sure that flirting with women had been programmed into James at birth. It wasn't like he'd ever actually *do* anything with Aaron's girlfriend. Well, probably. She wouldn't let him, at any rate. You know, it was a little surprising that Tony and Bruce weren't all over Marta yet. He thought they'd be quizzing her on science now. Well, he supposed that it might be because Tony and Bruce specialized in engineering and physics, while Marta was a geneticist, but Bruce did seem well versed in medicine and if one thing could be said about Tony Stark it was that he was a jack of all trades. The science talk would come eventually.

Clint looked back over at Phil. Phil wasn't looking back this time. Clint was brought back down to earth by Steve gently tapping his arm. Clint glanced up at him in question.

“Why don't you ask John, Sherlock, and Agent Coulson if they want to come help us out over here?” Steve asked gently, nodding over to where the three were still chatting in the corner of the kitchen.

Clint paused for a moment before nodding in consent, wiping the powdered sugar off his hands and onto a towel, still managing to get some on his jeans. He walked over to the three in the corner, Phil stepping aside a little to make room for him in their small circle.

“Hey,” he started out a little awkwardly, clearing his throat. “Cap was wondering if you guys would like to help us with the cookies or if you were just going to mooch off us later. They’re best when they’re right out of the oven, though, so if you actually want to get any you’ll probably have to pretend to powder a few.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude...” Phil began, seeming a little skittish.

“Of course not,” John piped in. “You’re not intruding at all. You said you have the week off, didn’t you?”

Phil nodded.

“Then why don’t you spend the week with us?” John supplied happily.

“Only if you don’t have plans already,” Clint interrupted, trying to give Phil an out. It was understandable the he wouldn’t want to spend his precious small amount of vacation time surrounded by coworkers and their random relatives.

“I,” Phil started, pausing for a moment to consider the situation, internally warring with something, although Clint didn’t really know what could be holding him back from politely leaving. Probably John, Clint thought, his stomach sinking.

“I don’t really have any plans,” Phil conceded, looking over at Clint. (Why Clint? Shouldn’t he be looking at John?) “I will have to pop back to my apartment at night, though. To water my plants and such.”

“Don’t worry. We’re not going to hold you hostage or anything...” Clint joked, only to trail off awkwardly as Quillan reentered the kitchen, giving Clint a disgruntled look. “Well, probably. *I* won’t, but I can’t make any promises about my brothers.”

John rolled his eyes, but was smiling and Phil had a polite kind-of-smile on his face, so Clint figured that everything was okay. Sherlock looked bored, but that seemed to be his default setting. Anyone else would be nervously and excitedly bouncing off the walls at spending the holiday with a bunch of secret agents and superheroes, but, well, John didn’t surround himself with just ‘anyone else.’ Clint still wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It really could go either way.

“We’re running out of cookies!” Marta yelled from over at the table where everyone else was congregated. “If you don’t hurry up you won’t get any!”

Clint shot Phil an apologetic smile before making his way back over to the table, squeezing back between Steve and Will. He was surprised a moment later when Steve made room to let Phil in on Clint’s left side. Clint shivered slightly as Phil’s shoulder pressed up against his, due to the lack of space around the table. He hoped that Phil didn’t notice it or passed it off as just an involuntary twitch, due to the fact that Clint typically didn’t like people touching him.

Natasha made eye contact with him and shot him a knowing smirk, which Clint pointedly ignored. No one else seemed to notice, so he figured he was in the clear. Or, well, he thought so until he saw John’s friend open his mouth, his eyes flickering between Natasha, Clint, and Phil, however

whatever he was going to say was cut off as John subtly elbowed Sherlock in the side, motioning for him to keep his mouth shut. Sherlock, surprisingly, obeyed. John then looked back over at Clint, giving him an apologetic smile, but didn't look away again until after shooting Clint a questioning look, motioning to Phil. Clint blushed. John smiled.

Clint had a sinking feeling that the entire tower would know about his monster crush on Phil by the end of the week, if not sooner. But, well, as long as *Phil* didn't know, then he supposed that was okay.

John was having a pretty good time so far. No one had died, the building was still in one piece, there had been no major arguments, his brothers were (generally) happy, and somehow Sherlock had managed not to piss anyone off yet. John wasn't quite sure how he'd managed that, but apparently some deity had smiled upon poor, put-upon John Watson and had granted him a day of peace. He was dreading tomorrow.

The Russian tea cakes had gone over well. Perhaps a little *too* well, considering they'd all eaten so many that they were all too stuffed to even contemplate dinner until ten that night. Tony Stark had decided that the best solution to this situation was to order Chinese food and watch a movie, which, John had to admit, sounded like a nice way to wind down. Well, kind of. He was starting to feel the jetlag taking its toll. Truthfully, he'd started feeling drowsy a couple of hours ago, but he could tell that his younger brothers, Clint especially, wanted to spend as much time as a family together as possible. John knew he'd feel guilty for blowing off Clint that night only to wake up at four the next morning while everyone else was asleep.

Sherlock seemed to be holding up well enough, despite having taken the same flight that morning. That was just Sherlock, though. If John didn't know him better, he'd think that Sherlock just didn't need sleep or food or any other basic human necessities. He'd spent too much time patching together a dehydrated, starved, exhausted Sherlock to think he was invincible like that, though. He'd managed to get Sherlock to eat a cookie earlier, however, so he'd count that as a small victory. John would see if he could get some Chinese food into Sherlock's stomach, too.

"So what are we watching?" Benji asked from his position on the dark brown couch to John's left.

"Well, if you'd like to hear Tony and Bruce drone on about scientific inaccuracies we could watch something sci-fi," Clint offered with dry humor. "Or anything with archery if you'd like to hear *me* complain."

"No mysteries," John added, glancing over at Sherlock, who looked simultaneously put out and relieved. "Sherlock will figure out who the criminal is within the first five minutes and tell us all at great length who it is and why they couldn't actually commit the crime in real life."

"I second that," Casey said from her position in an overly cushy armchair. "And nothing with the NYPD, or any other police department, really."

"Although John has not bothered to point it out in some misguided attempt at politeness, refrain from hospital dramas," Sherlock interjected. "He doesn't bother watching them unless he's in a particularly bad mood and feels the need to yell at something, which, while therapeutic, is apparently not acceptable while in the company of others. Or so John has told me."

John shot him an exasperated look. A glint of subtle humor shone in Sherlock eyes.

“No spy dramas, then, either,” Will nodded.

“What is there left to watch?” Jim wondered aloud.

“Chick flick?” Aaron suggested jokingly. “Or how about a Western?”

“That’d be right up your alley, wouldn’t it be, Will?” Jason broke in, grinning over at his brother, who was blushing slightly. “If I remember correctly, you said you wanted to be a sheriff when you grew up.”

“I was *nine*,” Will complained. *Complained*. He didn’t *whine*. “What about that film that won a lot of awards last year. *The Tree of Life* or something like that...”

Brian made a face and stuck out his tongue childishly, displaying his opinion of that film rather prominently, replying with, “I saw that in the theater, and I would have left after the first fifteen minutes if it wasn’t for the fact that the person sitting next to me was an old lady with a walker blocking my only escape route. Too much artistic shit for my tastes.”

“You wouldn’t be able to identify a work of art if you were standing in the middle of the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” Will shot back, crossing his arms. “Why should I take movie advice from a guy who only watches films with more than twenty explosions?”

“Cut it out you two,” John said, rolling his eyes at his two younger brothers. It was a little amusing to watch them wind each other up, but he knew that it would just end with one or both of them saying something really asshole-ish to the other and then they’d either jump at each other and start throwing punches or storm off their separate ways and refuse to talk for the next few days. John didn’t want to deal with the awkwardness at the breakfast table the next morning with the two of them shooting frosty glares at each other over their pancakes.

“What do you guys even have?” Jane asked, turning towards the Avengers. “That might help narrow down our search a little.”

“Everything,” Tony replied, sounding much too happy about making their decision even more difficult. “Seriously. I have the StarkFlix master database uploaded to the Tower network. I can get you any film your heart desires.”

“Really?” Marta questioned, a bit skeptical. “How about *Almanya*?”

“How do you spell that?” Tony asked. This time he was the one looking skeptical. “Is that even a real film?”

“Of course,” Bruce joined in, smiling over at Marta. “It’s spelled A-L-M-A-N-Y-A.”

Tony gave Bruce a strange look but quickly entered the letters into the movie database, instantly getting one specific result.

“German/Turkish comedy? Where do you *find* these things?” Tony exclaimed, looking between Bruce and Marta. “I didn’t know that German people *had* a sense of comedy in the first place. And it doesn’t even have English subtitles.”

Marta let out a soft huff of laughter and Bruce also looked amused at Tony’s bemusement. John couldn’t help but find it a little amusing himself. He’d never heard of the film, but it was kind of

interesting that it was in the StarkFlix movie archives. Well, it just went to show that Stark Industries never stopped at the minimum requirements or did a half-assed job. Which was actually rather comforting, considering they made the security systems for just about every high security facility in the world.

Of course, they still needed to pick a movie.

“Man of Iron, did you not say that you wished to acquaint the fine Captain and I with a certain picture pertaining to the daring capture of malevolent spirits of the deceased?” Thor boomed from where he sat on a different couch, squished in with Steve, Bruce, and Tony. Meaning he was right next to Tony and really didn’t have to “boom.” John suspected that that must just be his default setting. He supposed that it was better than Sherlock’s “blunt, blunter, and bluntest.” Maybe. John had absolutely no clue as to what movie Thor was referring to, though.

“Ghostbusters?” Clint asked, trying to clarify. “I’d be up to that.”

John had to fight not to laugh at that. He’d been expecting some horror film from Thor’s description.

“That’s more of a Halloween movie, though, isn’t it?” Quillan inquired, speaking up for the first time that evening. He was currently sitting as far away from James as could while still being in the room. “I haven’t personally seen it, but from the description it doesn’t exactly seem appropriate to this holiday.”

Brian rolled his eyes, saying, “I don’t really give a fuck. Let’s just watch something already before I fall asleep listening to you guys argue over what movie we should watch. Plus, I don’t even think that there’s really such a thing as a ‘Thanksgiving Movie’.”

“There probably is somewhere,” Will said, and John considered telling him not to be so combative. Of course, it might just be the analyst in him that made Will correct Brian, but John was pretty sure that at least half of it had to do with being brothers and thus feeling the need to compete with each other. He’d hold off on scolding them for now, but if they kept pushing each other’s buttons then he’d get involved. Thankfully, they seemed to actually respect his authority now. He couldn’t help but shudder as he remembered the “*You’re not the boss of me!*” days. John was *really* glad that they were (mostly) past that.

“Who here has seen *Ghostbusters* already?” Ethan asked, looking at everyone squished into the comfy room.

“Barton and I have,” Phil offered, closely followed by confirmations from Tony, Bruce, Jane, Benji, Jim, Marta and John.

“Neither of you guys have seen it?” Clint questioned, turning to Will and Jason.

“Nah,” Jason answered, shaking his head. “We would have seen it when we were kids, but Maria was kind of strict about what he watched. It had to be ‘educational’ – so we were basically restricted to documentaries and Schoolhouse Rock.”

“That explains so much,” Benji muttered, looking over at Will. He had clearly hadn’t meant to say it out loud, and looked rather embarrassed when Ethan let out a sharp bark of laughter and Will shot him a scathing look.

“Who’s Maria?” Jane asked, turning to Will, curious, but trying not to pry.

“Maria Walsh,” Jason interjected.

“She adopted us,” Will explained, although he seemed a bit reluctant to say so. “Jason and me.”

“You were adopted?” Ethan inquired, not having expected his teammate’s answer.

“You know, we can talk about this more later,” John interjected, saving Will, temporarily at least.

“I’d like to start watching the film before the jetlag fully catches up to me. That way I can at least fall asleep right as it gets to the good part.”

John added the slight joking tone in an attempt to ease a bit of the tension growing in the room and it seemed it was at least partly successful, until he looked over at Clint to see a concerned expression on his younger brother’s face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think about that,” Clint said, a hint of anxiety in his voice as he bit his bottom lip. “I should have remembered that you and James just had a long plane flight and a big time zone leap. We can hold off on the movie tonight and wait until tomorrow. I’m sorry – you don’t have to suffer through this.”

“It’s fine,” John reassured his younger brother. “We need to adjust to this time zone anyway. This’ll help force our internal clocks to reset more quickly.”

Clint looked like he was going to protest further, but he was cut off by an exaggerated sigh from Brian. “Can we just start the fucking movie already?”

Tony hit play.

Half an hour into the film, John could already feel himself begin to nod off. Sherlock was surprisingly warm for such a skinny, bony person. John had to resist the urge to lean into him, which would have been easier if he had someone on his other side to lean into, but he was sitting on the largest couch with Sherlock on one end and Phil on his other side. He didn’t think it was really appropriate to snuggle with a secret agent that you’d only met once before. Well, they *had* saved each other’s lives, but it would still be kind of awkward. Plus, John was pretty sure that the only person Phil wanted to cuddle with was Clint. Or, at least, that was what John suspected, considering how ninety percent of their earlier conversations seemed to veer off from the original topic to something about Clint. It was kind of adorable.

To distract himself, he focused on subtly checking up on his brothers. Will was curled up on one end of the brown couch to his left with Ethan next to him. John grinned slightly as he saw Ethan’s arm stretched over the back of the couch behind, but carefully not touching, Will’s shoulders. Jane was sitting on Ethan’s other side, her legs crossed as she sat upright, but not in an uncomfortable position. Benji was next to her on the other end of the couch, his legs pulled up on the couch in a cross-legged position, which always reminded John of Clint when he was little. It had been his favorite sitting position whenever he was forced to sit on anything other than a tree branch – ‘criss-crossed’ as he always insisted on calling it.

Meanwhile, on John’s own couch, which was in the middle of the room, Marta and Aaron were cuddling on the opposite end from where John sat. Aaron had coaxed Marta into letting him hug her, which had turned into him pulling her into his lap and tucking her under his chin. Which, admittedly, was rather adorable. John was glad that at least one of his brothers was in a healthy,

happy relationship. John couldn't help but notice, then, that Phil was no longer watching the movie, but instead was watching Clint, who was sprawled out on the carpeted floor as Natasha pulled his head into her lap and slowly massaged his scalp, relaxing both him and herself in the process. Phil just sat up more rigidly, not looking at all comfortable on the couch. However, John was distracted again as Sherlock shifted next to him, drawing up his legs into his normal, half crouched sitting position. John had no clue how that felt in any way comfortable.

John tore his gaze away from Sherlock, his eyes falling on the third couch in the room, over to his right this time. Tony, Steve, Thor, and Bruce were crammed together on the slightly too small couch, but none of them looked like they were bothered by the lack of space. Well, except for Steve, but John suspected that had more to do with the fact that Tony was constantly leaning over to give him a running commentary, while it was pretty clear that Steve just wanted to watch the film uninterrupted. Tony seemed to be an alright sort of guy, though. Once you were acclimated to his ego, of course. John approved of Clint's new friends, so far.

After the whole incident with Loki and the aftereffects of his mind control on Clint, John had been a bit worried about his little brother living with another alien – the brother of the person who'd hurt him, no less. A part of him reasoned that, technically, him worrying about Thor because he was an alien was a form of racism, but he wouldn't apologize for being worried because Thor was Loki's brother. Although, from what John had seen so far, Thor didn't agree with what his brother did at all. He did seem to have a larger capacity for forgiveness than John did, though, if his talk about wanting to save his brother from himself was any indication.

John glanced over at Natasha then. She'd been the first friend Clint had even introduced any of his brothers too. She seemed nice enough, and John supposed she was good for Clint, in the same, strange sort of way that Sherlock was good for John. Seeing them together again allowed John to understand ever so slightly why Sally Donovan had warned him about making friends with Sherlock. From an outsider's perspective, he could see how dangerous Natasha was. Even before knowing about her background he could tell – it was written plainly in the way she moved and in the ice behind her eyes. But then he'd seen the way that she was around Clint, the way her eyes thinned (maybe not *completely* melting) and the way her tense, ready for attack muscles relaxed. He could see that she was someone that Clint needed, too, and he wouldn't deny his little brother that unless he absolutely had to.

John watched Clint relax into Natasha's touch as she played with his hair. John had a sudden image in his head of a young Natasha and a female Clint braiding each other's hair at a sleepover and he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud. John saw some more movement out of the corner of his eye and looked over to where Brian and Jim were sprawled out on the floor next to Clint and Natasha. Brian had leaned over Jim's stomach to whisper something to Jason, somehow managing to plant his elbow in the middle of poor Jim's stomach. John half wondered if Brian did it on purpose, because Brian was not *nearly* that clumsy. Jim shoved Brian off, not very lightly, but not enough that it'd injure Brian. Brian glared at his friend and growled something that John couldn't make out, but Jim just smirked and mussed Brian's hair before Brian swatted his hand away. Jason just smirked.

Casey rolled her eyes at them and she tucked her legs up into the cushy armchair she was sitting in, somehow managing to look prim and proper despite her teenager-ish pose. She seemed nice enough, although John was a little curious as to why Jason had brought her along. They seemed to get along, and as his partner, Jason clearly trusted her at least somewhat, but they didn't seem all that close. Of course, John had always had a bit of a tougher time reading Jason. Some of his brothers, like Clint and Will, were open books to John, but Jason had always been a little more

difficult. Well, maybe not *always* – he'd certainly grown more withdrawn after his girlfriend's murder. John knew that Jason still blamed himself, and, if John was honest, he didn't think that Jason would ever forgive himself. John didn't think that Jason deserved to keep torturing himself with this, but he couldn't deny that Jason had had a small hand in the murder. It was nice to see Jason opening up to another girl, though – both his new girlfriend and Casey, just as a friend.

John finished his scan of the room with James and Quillan, his eyes flicking from one side of the room to the other. They were both seated in armchairs, although their postures differed considerably. James had a way of sitting in the chair that looked casual and yet completely choreographed, like the pictures you see in fashion magazines. He looked so put together, like he wouldn't bat an eyelash at anything, which John knew was at least partially true. It also pissed him off *so bloody much*. He still hadn't managed to corner James to talk to lecture him about faking his death, but John *would* get him eventually.

Q, on the other hand, was so much more like Sherlock. Even the way he was curled up in the overstuffed armchair was similar, that sort of balled up position that really shouldn't be comfortable. From what John had seen so far, he, like Sherlock, liked to say that he didn't care about anything and didn't let his emotions get in the way of things, but, like Sherlock, it was just a matter of being emotional about different things. Quillan clearly wasn't entirely comfortable around Sherlock currently, but John didn't have any clue why, yet. Sherlock had probably already deduced it, of course, so maybe he'd have to ask him later.

As John's thoughts strayed to Sherlock, he became more aware of his surroundings, more specifically he became aware of why Sherlock had been so uncharacteristically well behaved and hadn't made any scathing comments. Sherlock was asleep. His weight was beginning to lean on John's shoulder, the pressure slightly uncomfortable, because while Sherlock was very skinny, he wasn't exactly small. Thinking about sleep, John's body was taking the moment to remind John that he was tired, too. He tried to stay awake, turning back to the movie and blinking blearily as a giant Stay Puft Marshmallow Man thundered through downtown New York, but he couldn't contain a long yawn. The next time he blinked, his eyes wouldn't open again.

Clint came to the next morning to the delicious smell of pancakes wafting from the kitchen. He yawned and blinked the sleep from his eyes as he slowly woke up – an uncommon occurrence for Clint, as he had, over the years, trained himself to wake up instantly, not giving any indication of his awakened state until he could assess his situation and thrust his body into action. That ability had saved his life more than once, but when he was around his brothers, that skill evaporated, leaving him to wake up like a teenager the morning after final exams.

His sleep addled brain eventually realized that he was still sprawled out on the living room floor. He must have fallen asleep sometime during or after the movie, but he could feel from the residual heat in the space next to him that he wasn't the only one. Tony would probably tease him about Natasha sneaking out of his bed later. Speaking of bed, Clint didn't remember getting out the cream colored blanket that he was currently cocooned in. He took in a deep breath, nuzzling further into the blanket, not wanting to get up yet, despite how good the pancakes smelled, but he was surprised by the faint smell he detected on the blanket. It smelled like Phil – ink, paper, and chocolate. Did Phil...?

Clint shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought. It wouldn't do his pining conscious any good to dwell on imagined hints of affection. If Phil *had* been considerate enough to cover Clint and

Natasha with the blanket, it was only because he felt responsible for them, or maybe because he thought of them as friends. He wasn't interested in Clint *that* way. He was just a kind person. Clint couldn't help but wrap the blanket around his shoulders as he shuffled into the kitchen, though.

He paused in the doorway, blinking again to make sure he was fully awake, as he looked down on the largest of the couches in the room...where John and Sherlock were still fast asleep. It was...strangely adorable. John looked content, leaning against Sherlock, still swathed in a soft, fuzzy sweater, and while Sherlock had a slightly annoyed looking frown on his face even in his sleep, he was clearly sleeping soundly, his dreams undisturbed. At least that meant that Clint probably wouldn't have to compete with John for Phil's attention. Or, well, at least John probably wouldn't return Phil's affection. Clint felt a little guilty at that thought. It wasn't that he didn't want Phil to be happy, because he really did, he just...well, like he'd said earlier, it would hurt a lot more if Phil was with one of Clint's brothers than if he was with just some other random person.

Clint bit his bottom lip again, but he tried to shake those gloomy thoughts out of his head, turning away from John and Sherlock and walking into the kitchen. The kitchen was much cleaner than it had been last time he was inside, considering the last time he was there they were finishing up the Russian tea cakes. Clint had been sure that nothing short of magic would be able to clean the room, considering the amount of powdered sugar that had been spread over every available surface. Steve and Will had made a valiant effort at scrubbing away the powder, but they had hardly made a dent. If Clint hadn't had firsthand experience to tell him how horrible at magic Thor was, then he'd say it was the Norse god, but the one time he'd seen Thor attempt magic, there was *definitely* a larger mess afterwards than there was before.

However, once Clint saw who was at the stove, he froze.

"Jason," he started, licking his suddenly dry lips. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like?" the detective replied, grabbing another plate on which to stack the overflow of pancakes from the other plate he already had set out.

"Jason offered to make breakfast," Steve explained, smiling sweetly, naively. "He was just telling us about the diner he runs."

"We" – the people in the kitchen – currently consisted of Bruce, Tony, Phil, Jane, Marta, and Q. Clint poked his head back into the family room, noting that Thor, Brian, Jim, and Benji were also still asleep on the couches (or on the floor). Will, Aaron, James, and Natasha *better* have not known that Jason was cooking, because otherwise...

"Jason," Clint started again, his voice still a little rough from sleep. "What are you cooking?"

"Pancakes," Jason answered simply, flipping another one in the pan, and not bothering to elaborate.

"Yeah, I can see that," Clint replied, a little tersely. "I meant, what else have you put in them? Because I don't want anyone here dying of food poisoning."

"Stop making it sound like I'm trying to poison your friends," Jason said, rolling his eyes. "They haven't done anything to warrant that...yet."

"Jason," Clint said again, almost whining.

“Well, you were missing some essential ingredients for normal pancakes,” Jason huffed, conceding. “Thankfully there was everything I needed for normal batter, but you didn’t have any good fillers or toppings. Seriously, no blueberries?”

“Natasha’s allergic,” Clint interjected, interrupting his brother who just pouted at him.

“*Anyway*, I had to improvise a bit,” Jason continued. “I figured because you didn’t have any fresh fruit I’d use skittles and because you didn’t have any chocolate chips I’d use peanut butter. I also noticed that you don’t have any maple syrup, so I figured it’d be a good opportunity to try some hot sauce – ”

“No,” Clint blurted, a note of horror in his voice. “I can run to the store. Now. I can buy some before the others wake up. I’ll get dressed.”

“What’s wrong with pancakes and hot sauce?” Steve asked, throwing Clint for a moment. He had *not* been expecting Steve of all people to agree with Jason’s food tastes. “Last week Tony was telling me all about how ‘sushi’ is very popular. Apparently there are even some types with rice, seaweed, tuna, cucumber, mango, and fish eggs! So what’s wrong with pancakes and hot sauce?”

Clint wasn’t exactly sure how to respond to that. When phrased as such, he could certainly see the comparison... “Just humor me,” he said finally, giving Steve a halfhearted smile. “I’m kind of a traditionalist, and most people still use maple syrup – trust me. Jason’s just a bit of an oddball.”

With that, Clint hightailed it out of the kitchen, heading quickly, but quietly to the elevators. He could hear the volume level in the kitchen increase slightly as some sort of debate broke out – exactly what Clint had hoped to avoid by darting out of the kitchen so quickly. Clint had been hoping to avoid introducing his brother’s... *unique* brand of cooking to his teammates, but alas, nothing ever seemed to go as Clint planned it. Of course, that was half of the reason his life was as exciting as it was, but still, couldn’t he have just a few things in his life that went exactly as planned?

He stepped into the elevator as it smoothly slip open and waited impatiently as it steadily climbed the levels. Tony had once told him that if he kept on staring at the lights indicating what level they were on so intensely, then they’d burn out and he’d have to pay for the replacements. Clint stared at them anyway. He walked out of the elevator briskly as it deposited him onto the correct level, turning into the third door on his left (his bedroom). Clint changed with military efficiency, shucking his old clothes from the previous day that he had fallen asleep in and grabbing a fresh pair of jeans and a plain red t-shirt, quickly lacing up his combat boots before standing back up. He peered at his reflection in the mirror for a moment, running a hand through his mussed hair before deeming himself acceptable and striding back over to the elevator. He paused for a moment outside of the elevator and snagged a pair of sunglasses he kept near the door. He didn’t want to get held up by people asking for autographs. Which, admittedly, didn’t happen all that often, but still.

A few minutes, a couple of blocks, and three overly friendly dogs later, Clint found himself standing in line for the register at a small family run grocery store a little ways away from the Avengers Tower. He’d never actually been inside before, but he’d gone past it enough times to know that they’d have what he needed. Clint had spent a good few minutes in one of the short aisles, trying to decide what size jar of maple syrup to get, before deciding that with as many people as they had back at the Tower (super soldiers, alien gods, and genetically enhanced spies aside) that he should probably just get two of the largest ones. To her credit, the lady manning the cash register

didn't even bat an eyelash as he plunked down nothing except two oversized containers of maple syrup.

By the time Clint got back to the Avengers Tower, even though he'd gone shopping in record time, the others were already up and everyone was crowded into the kitchen again, varying looks of morbid curiosity on their faces as they watched Jason add all manner of strange ingredients to the pancakes. Clint resisted the urge to groan as he saw two empty packets of skittles sitting out on the counter. Jason had yet to grasp the concept that skittles did, in fact, not go well with everything. Or *anything* for that matter, in Clint's opinion, at least. They were a food item (could he really call them a "food item"?) that was forever doomed to be by itself, eaten alone and pure. Jason vehemently disagreed.

Jason appeared to have just finished up with the pancakes and was finally shooing the others into the dining room by the time Clint entered with the maple syrup.

"You're just in time," he grinned, grabbing the final plate of pancakes and bringing it into the dining room, Clint following behind. "If you'd have shown up any later then I'd have been *forced* to use the hot sauce."

"Well then it's good I got here just in time to spare you," Clint replied, setting the maple syrup down on the table and pulling out the chair between Natasha and Casey.

"Hey, where are James and Quillan?" Marta asked, looking around the table for the two MI6 agents. "I haven't seen them all morning."

"Ninety second storey," Sherlock answered casually, unenthusiastically poking at the pancake that John had scooped onto his plate. "...I was under the misconception that peanut butter is not an acceptable pancake filling."

"It's not," Casey muttered, softly enough that Clint was pretty sure only he and Aaron caught it.

"Wait, that floor is only accessible to Stark Industries employees with level three clearance," Bruce said suddenly, looking concerned. "What are they doing up there?"

"Sweet, innocent Brucie, I long ago learned that one cannot tell a spy where he can and cannot go," Tony replied dramatically, with some extra put-upon-ness and an emphasis on the "Brucie." "Or she," he added hastily after receiving challenging looks from both Natasha and Jane. The two spies smiled at each other before going back to their pancakes.

"But why would they be up there in the first place?" Will asked, making a face as he took a bite of his pancake, discreetly pushing the rest to the side.

"Well you see, when a man and his groupie –" Tony began, in the sort of tone some people use to talk to small children, only to be cut off by an annoyed huff from Sherlock.

"Don't be so dull," Sherlock snorted. "The ninety second floor houses the Stark Industries computer mainframe. My little brother is obviously trying to contact MI6 after you went to the trouble to block his network access. It would have been much simpler if you just let him tell those moronic imbeciles who he works for what the situation is. Bureaucracy."

"Yeah, well, I bet your little brother *wishes* it was the other option," Tony replied, smirking, earning him another glare from Sherlock.

“*Okay*,” Aaron interrupted, breaking in between the two. “I don’t want to talk about who you guys think my brother is having sex with anymore. Just no. How about plans for today? Anyone have anything specific they want to do?”

Tony looked like he was going to make another innuendo about *who* someone “wanted to do” but he refrained from saying anything, probably because of the venomous looks Steve, Bruce, Natasha, and Clint shot him. Tony rolled his eyes and slumped into the Tony equivalent of a pout.

“How about some sightseeing?” Will suggested, picking the skittles out of his already mangled pancake. “I’ve been to New York before, but it’s always been for a mission. I’ve never had time to go anywhere.”

“I wanna see the Empire State Building,” Brian chimed in, gesturing with his fork (which currently had a piece of pancake that was an alarmingly green shade attached to it).

“Sightseeing?” Jason asked, approving, looking around at the others for confirmation.

“Sightseeing it is, then,” Clint announced. It sounded like fun. He’d never really had a chance to see the city either. Plus, it’d just be a bunch of gawking like tourists (which, technically, they were). What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 4: Eight Hours

Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNINGS: First off, note that the rating for this story has gone up. This mainly has to do with violence and child abuse within this chapter and some more next chapter. It's not terribly graphic, but I'm erring on the side of caution.

Chapter Notes

ALSO: Go read the chapter summary for TRIGGER WARNINGS. So far this story has been 90% fluff, but I'm afraid that this chapter didn't quite turn out that way. Well, considering the plot I'd mapped out, this was going to happen eventually... it just came out a little angstier than I anticipated. There's seriously only like two paragraphs of fluff in this entire chapter. And no, this chapter is not made up of only two paragraphs. This chapter: angst like whoa.

Someone also requested a character masterlist for those of you who aren't really familiar with all of the characters. I've added it as an extra chapter (chapter five). Hopefully it's helpful! (You can note that James Bond/Q has also been officially added to this story's tags.)

Aaron Cross was, all things considered, relatively happy. He was currently standing on the balcony of the Empire State Building with six of his seven crazy brothers and their friends and so far no one had tried climbing over the safety fence. That was a win in his books. He was still keeping a close eye on Clint, though – you could never be too careful around him when it came to high up places. Truthfully, Aaron found his brother's habit kind of cute, which, to most people, probably sounded kind of twisted. I mean, how can your brother risking his life by climbing on the side of one of the tallest buildings in the United States ever be considered *cute*?

Aaron supposed it had something to do with his own selfish happiness at the fact that this meant that Clint trusted them to catch him, should he fall. Not that Clint would fall; he wasn't a superhero and superspy for nothing. But, you know how the saying goes – it's the thought that counts. Aaron was constantly grateful for how his brothers always were willing to be themselves around him.

He was also grateful that *he* was able to be himself around them. Aaron had so many different names and identities that sometimes it felt like he didn't quite know who he was anymore. His brothers helped ground him. They helped him remember that, above all, he would always be Aaron Barton. Strangely, though, he'd become more and more comfortable with Aaron Cross lately, probably because of Marta. Aaron Barton belonged to his brothers. Aaron Cross belonged to Marta Shearing.

Kenneth J. Kitsom belonged to no one. Kenneth J. Kitsom belonged to the CIA, actually. That's the name that was on his army enlistment papers and that was the name that dotted the most classified

of CIA files left over from Operation Outcome. See, Kenneth J. Kitsom was born out of a need, out of necessity. Kenneth *James* Kitsom. The James part might have been a slightly risky move, but he'd never regretted it. He needed it to remember who he was.

See, Kenneth J. Kitsom was all a shield. He was fake. When James Bond (James *Barton*) joined MI6 he knew that he had to take precautions to protect his brothers. The paper trail was the first to go. That would keep them safe at least somewhat. James couldn't risk anyone finding out about his brothers – couldn't risk them being used against him. And if by some chance someone did find his brothers, he knew that they could protect themselves, at least somewhat.

Except for one. Aaron Barton (adopted by the Cross family) was a sitting duck. So James took his precautions one step further. Only a few days later, Aaron found himself in Irwin, a state home in Reno, Nevada. Except he wasn't "Aaron" anymore – he was officially "Kenneth James Kitsom." At the time he didn't understand it, why he had to become someone else, but James was so gentle about it, but so *urgent*. He didn't understand, but he knew when his brother needed something and he knew that he couldn't let his brother down.

But then he enlisted and got blown up and everything went to hell. He remembered snippets of the initial Outcome interview. The "test." When he woke up the next time in a crisp white CIA hospital room he couldn't remember anything. When a strange man had come into his room a few minutes later and started talking to him about amnesia, it seemed plausible enough. Everything seemed to make vague sense.

Except for the name. He didn't know what exactly was wrong with the name "Jimmy Quidd" but he knew beyond a doubt that it wasn't his. He told the agent that much. The man gave him a calculating look and asked him what his real name was, then. He contemplated it for a moment and the name "Aaron Cross" slid off his tongue like melted chocolate, smooth and easy. Apparently it was different enough from "Kenneth J. Kitsom" that he was allowed to keep it.

Aaron had talked with his brothers about changing his name back to Aaron Barton before, but in the end he decided to stick with Aaron Cross. Not just because he didn't want to put his brothers in danger as he was still on shaky ground with the CIA, but also because, well, he'd grown kind of fond of the name. He'd created new memories with it. Mr. and Mrs. Cross had been nice enough people, even though their relationship had always been too polite to really be called familial and he liked acknowledging that they had been part of his life. (He'd taken special precautions to make sure that he couldn't be tracked back to them.) More importantly, though, was that Aaron Cross was the man that Marta Shearing had fallen in love with. Oh, she knew about Kenneth J. Kitsom and about Aaron Barton, but Aaron Cross was the first person she'd met.

(Well, technically number five was the first she'd met, but he was going to ignore that.)

Aaron had been very cautious when beginning a more than platonic relationship with Marta. He knew he could trust Marta with his life – she'd proven that time and time again – but trusting her with his emotions was very different. Letting her trust *him* with her emotions was even more difficult, especially because he'd never done this emotional trust thing with anyone but his brothers before.

When Aaron found out that Marta's former boyfriend had been Peter Boyd, also known as "Outcome Three" he almost called off their relationship. How was he supposed to tell Marta that her boyfriend didn't dump her because he wanted to but because the CIA forced him to? How was

he supposed to tell Marta that he'd seen Peter killed, right in front of him – watched as the cabin was blown up by a missile? That Peter had told him, ever so subtly, about her?

He avoided her for nearly a full week before she finally pulled him aside and demanded to know what was wrong. Marta sat patiently as it all came spilling out. At the end, she looked conflicted and told him softly that she needed some time by herself to think. Because starting a new relationship half a year after being dumped by your long term boyfriend is different than starting a new relationship after your boyfriend was forced to cut off your relationship to protect you from the CIA, only to find out that your new boyfriend was your ex's coworker and the last person he had contact with before he died. Yeah. Just a little complicated.

She hadn't ended it, though. Their relationship was a little awkward at first and Aaron couldn't help but feel like he was taking advantage of her sometimes, but it worked out in the end. He loved Marta, he really did, and he couldn't imagine trusting anyone with his feelings as much as he did her.

"Hey, Earth to Aaron," Marta's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Hmm?" He replied, looking over at her questioningly.

"You just looked kind of out of it there," she said, smiling at him slightly. "That, and Clint and Will's friend with the dark hair look like they're about to do something stupid."

That certainly got Aaron's attention. Hearing that any of his brothers were going to do something stupid while they were currently on the observation deck at the top of the Empire State Building was *not* good. At all. He whipped around to find Clint and Ethan treating the overhanging metal fence like monkey bars. The fence went straight up for about eight feet before curving back over the observation deck for about two feet. Clint and Ethan were swinging about on the overhanging bars like they were eight year olds on a playground. At least they weren't on the opposite side of the fence yet. Other people were starting to stare.

"Seriously, you two?" Will yelled, supremely frustrated. "What part about 'don't climb on the fence' don't you understand?!"

"All of it?" Clint supplied cheekily, swinging himself up so that now he was sitting *atop* the overhanging bars. In his mind's eye, Aaron could already see him slipping backwards...

"Hey, give me a lift!" Brian yelled, trying to climb up next to Clint.

"I thought you were supposed to be loitering on the street corner, Bri," Clint teased, causing Brian to growl at him.

"I'm not even wearing the stupid eyeliner anymore!" he whined, sulking slightly.

Clint looked like he was about to reply, but he was cut off by an angry shout.

"Sir! Get down from there and step away from the fence!" an unknown voice ordered, and out of Aaron's peripheral vision he saw two security officers advancing towards them cautiously. "If you don't remove yourself from the fence we'll be forced to call emergency services!"

Clint rolled his eyes and muttered something that Aaron couldn't catch but he jumped down from his perch. Ethan also let go of the bars, landing gracefully beside him. Will marched up to them and

slapped both of them on the back of the head, causing both of them to look equal parts sheepish and annoyed.

“Sir, we’re going to have to ask both of you to vacate the premises,” the other security officer said steadily. “We’ll escort you downstairs.”

“Seriously, you guys?” Jason complained, but he moved to follow them out anyway.

“You guys don’t – ” the officer started, only to stop midsentence, giving Jason a slack jawed look. Aaron walked over to them and the officer’s eyes got even wider with disbelief. He looked around the observation deck more carefully as the other brothers all gathered near them and he shut his eyes for a moment, shaking his head to clear it.

“Uh,” the other officer started, “It was you, right?” he said, pointing at Clint. “You were the one on the fence...?”

“Yes, he was,” Aaron answered, gently shoving Clint to the forefront of the pack. Clint shot him a slightly betrayed look, which Aaron answered with his ‘I told you so’ eyebrow raise.

“Uh, well,” the officer stuttered uncertainly, eyes darting between identical Barton brothers.

“We’ll just all leave now,” Aaron said, waving them off. “Sorry for the trouble.”

Thankfully the elevators were large enough to fit all of them. They rode down the one hundred and two stories in relative silence, Clint and Ethan fidgeting sheepishly before Will decided to squeeze in between the two, grabbing their hands tightly, causing all fidgeting to still instantly. Ethan’s fingers twitched slightly, as if wanting to thread themselves between Will’s fingers before thinking better of it. Thankfully (or unfortunately), Will didn’t seem to notice. They all piled out of the elevator slowly as it jerked to a stop at street level.

“I’m going to quick go to the restroom,” Clint said, slipping his hand out of Will’s stranglehold, motioning over his shoulder.

They spread out through the lobby, loitering about waiting for Clint as the security officers guarded the elevators, still watching them suspiciously. Aaron decided he might as well make some small talk while they were waiting.

“So, what are your intentions with my brother?” he asked casually. If this was an op and he had tea in front of him he would have taken a sip right then.

Ethan floundered like a fish out of water. If this was a rom-com then Ethan would have also taken a sip of his tea. Except now he would have spit it out in shock.

“I’m not – I – *What?*” the IMF agent sputtered, clearly caught off guard.

“Exactly what I said, *Hunt*,” Aaron replied, a hint of steel in his emphasis of Ethan’s last name. God, he could totally understand why fathers did this to their daughter’s boyfriends. It was *fun*.

“Nothing!” Ethan protested, perhaps a bit too quickly. “Er, well, I want him on my team, but that’s all. Really,” he added when Aaron didn’t look convinced. “I have an ex wife. We’re not even technically divorced. If you’re implying that I’m, ah, romantically after Will, that is. Which I’m not.”

Ethan couldn't help but look over to where John and Will were chatting, however, giving himself away.

"Oh no, I'm implying that you're a sexual deviant after my innocent brother's virtue," Aaron replied casually.

Ethan blanched.

"I will *not* hesitate to castrate you if you try anything untoward," Aaron continued. Oh, he was *completely* serious about this part. "Will may be oblivious now, but if you try anything before he's ready..."

Aaron trailed off, in part to sound more threatening, but also because something was off. What was wrong? Ethan looked confused for a moment before catching onto the tension in Aaron's posture, immediately searching out his teammates. Aaron saw Ethan relax slightly as his eyes landed on Will, Benji, and Jane but he continued to help scan the room, trying to find what set Aaron off.

James appeared to be flirting idly with Casey, who was, actually, remarkably good at brushing him off while Q hovered nearby, pretending to be interested in a leaflet with historical information about the Empire State Building. Brian, Jim, Jason, and Tony were a little ways away (all wearing grins that made Aaron feel a little uncomfortable, but not enough so as to set off his danger senses). Marta was conversing with Phil and Natasha, and Aaron felt a little bit of the tension in his shoulders drain out as he verified that she was unharmed.

Over on the other side of the entryway, Steve, Thor, and Bruce appeared to be giving directions to a lost (and rather star struck) looking tourist, plotting out a route on their map with the woman's spare pen. Lastly, Will, Jane, Benji, John, and Sherlock were laughing about something. Maybe something was off about a civilian in their vicinity...? Eyes still drifting over near John's crew, his older brother's friend, Sherlock, suddenly started walking towards Aaron and Ethan, a slightly disturbing look of concentration in his eyes. Aaron felt something icy clench in his stomach.

"Your brother, Clinton, has been in the loo for approximately ten minutes and fifty four seconds," the tall man announced bluntly. "Also, the man with the green scarf entered about two minutes after him and has also not come out."

"Shoulder length, black, slicked back hair and green eyes?" a voice broke in from behind Aaron, nearly making the spy jump. The only reason he didn't was because he recognized the voice as Agent Coulson's.

"Yes. He was also wearing a fedora and a waistcoat, much too expensive to simply be a tourist taking in the sights. However, he was clearly uncomfortable with the area, as shown by the way his eyes lingered on another tourist's map. His hands, however, did not have any gun calluses nor did he appear to be equipped with any concealed weapons," Sherlock rattled off calmly.

"He doesn't need any concealed weapons," Bruce supplied, clearly doing his best to reign in his anger at the moment. "Fuck."

"Your description matches Loki," Phil explained, a deep set frown on his face. He was outwardly calm, but his eyes showed a hint of panic.

"Wait, Loki as in that guy who kidnapped Clint and brainwashed him to do his dirty work?" Brian interjected, sounding horrified. "Shit, shit, shit! How the fuck did you guys not notice?!" he

exclaimed, rounding on the Avengers, who looked equal parts angry and guilty.

“No,” Thor boomed, however it was still rather soft, almost as if he was trying to sternly sooth Brian. “If Loki were to be out in public in such a crowded area with us in the vicinity, he would most certainly use an Asgardian cloaking spell. The only reason the noble Detective would be able to bypass it would be because he is a gifted child of Lady Vör.”

“Fuck,” Aaron repeated, already rushing over to check the men’s room, his brothers hot on his heels. They tore through the restroom as best they could while still being (relatively) polite. Aaron banged through the stalls, trying to find Clint or at least something that would give him a clue as to what had happened to his brother.

“I found Clint’s subway ticket!” Jason yelled from a few stalls over, causing everyone to rush over to him. Sure enough, it was Clint’s – Aaron could tell by the way that it was folded over into precise little squares, a nervous habit of Clint’s. Aaron could see no blood in the vicinity, which was probably good, but he couldn’t be sure. Going up against an alien good was certainly foreign to him: they were playing a whole new type of ball game now.

“Shit,” he muttered again, doing his best to not let his hands tremble as they carefully held the edge of the ticket.

“I’m calling SHIELD,” Phil announced abruptly, pulling a sleek black phone out of his pocket and dialing with lightening speed. “I’ll get them to quarantine the area so we can scan it for any magic residue that Loki may have left behind.”

“There will be,” Thor said confidently, but at the same time gravely. “While my brother may be much more well versed in magic than I, I am well aware that transportation magic is of the hardest class of magicks. It takes up much power and it is certain to leave behind a traceable trail.”

“What if he didn’t use transportation magic?” John asked, examining a scuff mark on the tile floor of the bathroom. “He could use the cloaking thing again, couldn’t he?”

“No,” Thor answered, shaking his head. “If he had then the Son of Vör would most certainly have seen him.”

Sherlock looked annoyed but didn’t bother to correct him this time.

“Fuck,” Brian said again, running a hand roughly through his messy hair. “Fuck. What can we do for now?”

“Nothing much,” Steve replied, sighing. “We should regroup back at the Tower.”

“Shouldn’t we wait here to find out the results of the magic residue tests?” Brian snapped, glaring at Steve. “We can’t just wait around for something to happen!”

“Brian...” Aaron began warningly, stepping in front of his brother slightly.

“*Don’t* cut me off!” Brian growled, reminding Aaron of a cornered alley cat. “Why are we even trusting these guys? The only reason they’re here with us is because Clint has to live with them! I mean, *that* guy,” he snarled, pointing at Phil, “wasn’t even invited! He just happened to stumble in at the right time!”

“Brian, Phil is a friend of mine, too,” John interjected, steel in his tone.

“Only because he saved your life in Afghanistan once!” Brian pointed out. “You *know* that it’s different in war! If I brought home every other SEAL who saved my life out there we wouldn’t be able to fit them all! Don’t you think that maybe there’s a *reason* that Clint’s never brought him over despite how long they’ve known each other?”

“Brian!” James barked, trying to stop him, but the other brother just ignored him and barreled on.

“Don’t pretend like it’s not a valid question!” Brian continued with just as much force. “Clint clearly doesn’t want the guy here!”

Aaron’s gut clenched with worry as he saw Phil’s expressions start to shut down. The agent was probably trying to maintain a professional façade, but Brian’s words were still cutting deeply.

“Just look at how they fucked up last time!” at that proclamation, everybody became deathly still. “Clint was at that bastard’s mercy for three days! *Three whole days!* And what did anybody do to try and rescue him? *Nothing*. They sat on their fucking asses and argued with each other. I mean, does no one think it’s a little weird that they managed to capture Loki but didn’t look farther for Clint? And then they spent all that time interrogating the fucker about his motives instead of trying to figure out where Clint was! The only person who seemed to give a damn about my brother was Natasha, and she’s the only one here that Clint’s ever voluntarily brought over before!

“And even *you*,” he hissed, rounding on an expressionless Natasha, “didn’t do what you fucking should have done for my brother once you broke him out of Loki’s control. You *hit him on the head* hard enough to *knock him out* and then you expect him to fly a fucking plane? After three days of Loki doing god knows what to him you expect him to be fit for battle?”

“He volunteered,” Steve began weakly, flinching slightly when Brian turned to him.

“If you really knew my brother,” Brian said in a low voice, no less furious than he had been before, “then you would know that you can’t fucking trust him to say what’s wrong or tell you when he’s in pain. You don’t fucking *deserve* him. You’re not part of this family.

“Now *I*,” Brian continued, “am going to do the logical thing and tell every goddamn agency I can think of to put a BOLO out on Loki and Clint. *Then* I am going to scour this city from top to bottom to find him.”

With that, he stormed out of the bathroom, roughly grabbing a cell phone out of his pocket and punching the numbers with so much force that Aaron thought he might break it. Aaron worried his bottom lip with his teeth, glancing over at the other Avengers. The overprotective brother in him could certainly see where Brian was coming from, he couldn’t pretend that he hadn’t found some of their early actions suspect, but from what he’d seen in the past couple of days and from what he’d heard from Clint, they *were* becoming part of the family.

“Look, I’m...” Aaron began, turning to face the Avengers. “Brian’s worried. He’s angry. He just needs some time to simmer down. If he was thinking straight he’d have known that none of that’s true – ”

“He’s right,” Tony, surprisingly, butted in. “We’ve only known each other for three months and we did a pretty piss poor job of rescuing him at the beginning.”

Steve opened his mouth to say something but Tony waved him off, motioning for Steve to let him continue.

“That doesn’t mean, however, that we’re going to sit back on our asses and let it happen again,” Tony said with a darkly serious tone to his voice. “Your brother has a point when he says we need to take action – ”

“But we need to think it through first before we let Loki lead us on a wild goose chase,” Steve interrupted, looking over at Tony.

There was a moment of tense silence before James said, “Fine. You have the greatest knowledge of Loki so we’ll defer to you for the moment, but you make one misstep...”

“...and we’ll take matters into our own hands,” John finished, crossing his arms and widening his stance.

“What about Brian?” Will asked, looking over to the doorway that the most hot headed of the brothers had stormed out of. “I know you said let him simmer, but I don’t feel comfortable with any of us being isolated at the moment.”

“I can head a search party,” Jim volunteered. “He can’t have gone too far.”

“Do you people have no concept of jinxing? Seriously, I knew that Clint had a weird tendency toward phrases such as ‘it can’t get any worse,’ but you too?” Tony complained. “Is it like some disease they carry? The Barton ‘Please World Fuck Me Over’ disease?”

Bruce shot Tony a sharp look. He looked very tempted to just slap a hand over Tony’s mouth to keep him from talking anymore – or at least for the time being.

“Bit not good?” Aaron heard Sherlock mutter to John.

“Bit not good,” John confirmed, although he sounded more tired than angry or even annoyed. Huh. Aaron would have to ask what that was all about later. But right now he needed to focus on Clint. Aaron was about to take charge, when he heard Phil clear his throat and begin to speak.

“Okay,” he began, clearly slipping into ‘Agent Mode.’ “Street, Romanov, Hunt, Carter, Shraeger...”

Here his voice faltered ever so slightly as his eyes switched over from Jim, Natasha, Ethan, Jane, and Casey to look over at Jason, Aaron, and James.

“...Walsh, Bond, and Watson you are to find Gamble and, based on your assessment of the situation, either bring him in or continue to aid him in his endeavors,” he ordered crisply. “Street and Romanov, you’re together; the rest of you partner up – one Barton sibling per pair. We need someone that Gamble will actually listen to on each team.”

The eight nodded, some more reluctantly than others and paired up: Natasha with Jim, as per orders although the set of her lips indicated that she’d rather be looking for Clint, Jason with Casey, James with Ethan (James had originally started walking over to Jane, but Will shot him a warning look, stopping him long enough for Ethan to intercept him), and John with Jane.

“Street and Romanov, head directly back to headquarters and get a quinjet. I’ll have Sitwell set one up for you,” Phil, no *Agent Coulson* commanded.

“Sir, neither of us are pilots,” Natasha cut in, giving him a questioning look. Or what Aaron assumed was a questioning look – all of her expressions tended to look the same to him.

“Which is why I said I’d have Sitwell handle it, Specialist,” the SHIELD agent replied, a hint of impatience in his voice. Natasha narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t make any further comments. “Walsh and Shraeger, I want you to use the police resources at your disposal to their greatest extent. If anyone gives you any trouble, have them run this card.”

He handed them a nondescript looking pass card, but Jason pocketed it without question, any former humor in his expression completely gone.

“Bond, Hunt, Watson, and Carter, I want all of you on street level,” Coulson instructed, turning to the last of Brian’s search party. “Head in opposite directions taking the course that Gamble would be most likely to follow.”

They nodded and, confident that they understood, the SHIELD agent moved on to the others.

“Stark, Banner, Rogers, Dunn, Shearing, Cross, Brandt, Holmes, and...Q, you’re with me,” Coulson continued. “Thor, contact Heimdall and get the Bifrost up as quickly as you can. I also want all of you to keep in radio contact,” Coulson said, pulling out a dark box from the briefcase he was carrying, handing each of them an earpiece. “Now go. We’ll regroup at Stark tower in six hours.”

Once the eight who were assigned to finding Brian had left, Coulson turned back to the members of Clint’s search party. Aaron had expected his expression to be drawn and weary or maybe worried, but he was surprised to see nothing but concentrated determination on the SHIELD agent’s face. Clint had always said that Coulson was a good handler and commander, but Aaron had secretly doubted it a little when he’d first laid eyes on the easygoing man in the pristine suit. He thought that maybe with Clint’s crush speaking more than his mind. Apparently he was wrong.

“Stark, which has better facial recognition software, SHIELD or Stark Tower?” he asked, deferring judgment for the first time. Aaron raised one eyebrow. The man knew how to play the best cards in his deck, despite the fact that SHIELD would probably want them using their database.

“Is that even a question, Agent?” Stark replied, smiling cockily. “It’s *Avengers* Tower, by the way. It was officially changed a month ago.”

“Avengers Tower, then,” Coulson confirmed, knowing how to choose his battles. “Stark, I want you to run Banner and Dunn through the programs and then get to work on it. Focus outside of the US. Also, show Q to the CCTV camera database,” at this he turned to the youngest of the group. “I want you to hack into any and all cameras in New York. Once you finish with that, go through all of the states. I want your brother to give us a rundown on what he can deduce from whatever information we have on Loki and then he and Brandt can work with you on the video footage. I’m sure the two of them can work just as well, if not better, than the facial recognition software.”

He glanced at the two men in question for confirmation, eliciting a slightly arrogant scoff from Sherlock and a crisp nod from Will.

“It would be best if you gave me a map of the area first,” Sherlock said, unnerving eyes boring into Coulson’s. “I can deduce the likelihood of his presence in various areas based on your information on him, which should make the search quicker.”

Coulson nodded his assent and then turned to the remaining four. “Cross, Rogers, you’re with me. I want you on strategy for when we do find Clint. We need to meet with Director Fury first, but then we can discuss rescue tactics. We can’t do a whole lot until we know where Loki’s holding Clint, but I want you to be able to equip everyone based on what we have in SHIELD’s arsenal, along with whatever Stark has squirreled away.

“Thor,” he barked, finally rounding on the large blond man. “Get to Asgard as quickly as you can and alert them of the situation. Your main focus is on finding any other means of tracking and subduing Loki but if you have time, I want to know how the hell Loki managed to get back to Earth when he was supposed to be so imprisoned that he couldn’t even *sneeze* without setting off alarms.”

“I will depart at once,” Thor boomed, conjuring his hammer.

“It would probably be best not to do it right here,” Coulson supplied calmly, although he appeared to be ever so slightly amused.

“Ah, of course,” Thor smiled. “The summit of this magnificent tower would be much more suitable.”

With that he left.

With an inaudible sigh, Agent Coulson turned to the last person in their party. “Dr. Shearing, I’d like for you to accompany me back to the hellicarrier. SHIELD R&D is currently doing some tests on Asgardian DNA based on some samples from Loki and Thor, but it’s going pretty slowly. We have, however, deciphered that there are subtle differences in the nucleic acids that make up their base pairs. We’re assuming that it’s somehow connected to their ability to perform magic, but we’re currently at an impasse. Any help you, as a geneticist, could offer would be extremely helpful, especially anything that we could use to track Loki with.”

“Alright,” she replied.

“Let’s bring it,” Tony smirked, rubbing his hands together. “Come minions,” he said, motioning to Benji, Bruce, and Q. Benji looked happy enough at being a “minion” of Tony Stark, while Bruce looked fondly exasperated. Q just looked annoyed. He followed along anyway.

And that’s exactly what I have to do, Aaron thought. I may not like my brother’s safety resting in these people’s hands, but there’s not much I can do about it for now except go along with it and play my part.

With that, he followed the others out of the bathroom.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, you little shit?” an angry voice echoed through the slightly rundown, one storey house.

“Stopping you from doing something fucking stupid!” another, much younger voice hissed. The lilt of the boy’s American accent was strange, wrong somehow to Clint’s addled mind. It was different. Why was it different?

“James fucking Barton you step away from that little bitch s’ I c’n teach her a g’damn lesson!” the older man growled, uncontrollable fury in his slowly slurring words.

“Make me,” the boy, no teenager, retorted, not moving from where he stood in front of the prone woman on the floor.

And make him the man did. Clint tried to block out the sounds, tried to close his eyes. He curled up into the smallest shape he could (Which was pretty small. When had he become so tiny and bony?), clutching his hands over his ears – praying to god it would stop. Praying to god that it would all just go away –

Clint Barton, agent of SHIELD, Avenger, and adult woke with a start. He gasped for breath, trying not to choke on the vomit threatening to come up his throat, or the heaving sobs that seized his body. He was half blind with the tears he didn’t know he was crying and weak as a newborn kitten with his trembling body and racing heart. His ears still rang even though it was clear now that the noises had only been inside his head. His trembling hands clenched around the air and he tried to steady his breathing, slowly bringing it down almost to normal.

God, he hadn’t had a dream that bad in a long time. Years, in fact, and it’d been a full four years since he’d had *that* dream, feverish and alone in a safe house in Bogota. Fuck, if he hadn’t woken up when he did...

“Interesting,” a crisp voice said, breaking through the din of Clint’s heavy breathing and the thud of his racing pulse. “I honestly didn’t expect you to end it so soon, though, Archer. Pity. I was finding it quite...*enlightening*.”

Clint’s entire body stiffened. He cringed internally and it took all his self control not to cringe externally, too. Damn! He thought he’d gotten past this – cowering like a beaten dog. He tried to center himself, focusing on the surprisingly soft fabric under his fingertips, plush and navy blue. God, he wanted to scratch it to pieces! His eyes trailed over the polished hardwood floors, up to the wallpaper-less, steel blue walls. They were clearly in the living room of the building, so it was either a house or an apartment. The curtains over the floor to ceiling windows were drawn, and Clint had no way of telling what was beyond the heavy fabric.

The gold sconces were the only light source in the room, barring a single upright standing lamp. Clint’s eyes caught sight of some boxes in the hallway just past Loki’s head, identifying them quickly as moving boxes. The Trickster strode elegantly into the room, seating himself gracefully across from Clint in a matching navy blue and light ash wood armchair. The other man examined Clint closely before a grin broke out on his face.

“You don’t know where we are yet, do you?” Loki said tauntingly, looking as gleeful as Clint had ever seen him. “Oh, isn’t this just *delightful*. Maybe I can jog your memory.”

Loki snapped his fingers, tiny blue sparks spitting from his fingers and fizzling out on the floor. Clint had to resist gasping for breath as the presence of the room bore down on him, the scent absolutely *overwhelming*! He heard his own harsh pants echoing in the small space as Loki casually waved his hand, dispelling the sensation.

“Scent is a rather powerful memory trigger, now isn’t it,” Loki said, his voice soft and falsely soothing. Clint hated the way he wanted to lean into it, let it wrap around his mind and take him somewhere else.

God – after this, how could he ever...?

“I won’t let you...do this...again,” Clint growled, embarrassed at how choked his words sounded, but proud that they came out at all.

“Clint, why must you continue to deny your will to submit?” Loki asked, sounding like a tired parent just trying to convince their stubborn child that this was only for their own good. “Haven’t you seen by now what happens when you try to resist?”

Clint wanted to vomit.

“Don’t worry, little bird,” Loki said, standing from the chair and walking over to where Clint still lay prone on the couch. “If you obey, I won’t have resort to any drastic measures, will I? You remember what it was like before? Did I ever do any wrong by you? Did I neglect you, pet?”

As soon as Loki’s long pale fingers touched his cheek, Clint acted on pure animal instinct, his fingernails like claws aimed directly for Loki’s face. His aim was true, but like that moment during the Chitauri invasion, the Trickster caught his blow. This time, however, there was no explosion. Clint felt Loki’s spindly fingers wrap around his neck, pressure increasing until Clint was sure that he would leave behind a ring of bruises. Like a collar. Fuck, this was messed up.

Loki finally released his grip and Clint had to struggle not to hyperventilate as air rushed back into his lungs. The insane man’s hand darted out again, grabbing Clint’s hair and tugging, forcing Clint to look up into his crazed eyes. Clint found himself unable to move save for his heart beating and his lungs breathing. He couldn’t struggle, he couldn’t look away, he couldn’t even *blink*.

“In twelve hours time, you will either come with me willingly,” Loki drawled, his voice thick like honey, “or I’ll leave your broken body here on this couch for whomever gets here first to find. I rather hope it’s the owner, don’t you?”

With that, Loki gently shut Clint’s eyes with his fingertips. Clint blacked out.

There were no appropriate words to describe how Jason was feeling right now. Rage didn’t cover it. Neither did worry or panic, or even a mix of the three. It was like when Sarah went missing – when she was killed. He knew why she was missing and he knew who had taken her...and he knew what the outcome was going to be, but he didn’t know where she was or what was happening to her. He was a detective! Shouldn’t he be able to find Clint? Wasn’t that his fucking *job*? He wasn’t even allowed to look for Clint right now! He was supposed to find Brian. Oh, he knew why Brian stormed out the way he did. In fact, he was tempted to do so himself, but goddamn it! This was *not* what he needed right now!

Jason stormed into the police station with all the rage of a hurricane, doors slamming and papers whirling out of unsuspecting hands in tiny tornados. Leo scrambled behind his desk in what was more of a “please god don’t kill me” position than a defensive one, only relaxing when he realized it was only Jason and Casey.

“What the fuck are you doing, busting in here like that?” an irked female voice called out, its owner a prim looking Hispanic woman. “Aren’t you supposed to be on vacation?”

“Allison,” Jason greeted abruptly, pausing in front of her. “I want you to issue a BOLO for me.”

“Okay,” Allison said, looking a little skeptical. “For who?”

“For me,” Jason answered curtly, pushing past her towards his cluttered desk.

“Yeah, I get that,” Allison replied, looking annoyed. “I meant, who should we be on the lookout for? Who’s the suspect?”

“*Me*,” Jason repeated, slightly exasperated. “Except wearing either a tight black t-shirt and gray, washed out jeans, or wearing a purple t-shirt, black jacket, and blue jeans.”

“You get yourself cloned or something?” she asked, blinking, but taking it in stride.

“I told you I have brothers,” Jason replied, starting up the computer on his desk and not meeting Allison’s eyes. “We’re just...identical.”

“There are four more of him,” Casey chimed in. “And one has a tattoo, three ear piercings, and wears eyeliner.”

“There are five, actually,” Jason corrected, bringing up the criminal records database and typing in ‘Loki.’ “William’s over in Afghanistan.”

“There’s no way any woman could actually pop out that many babies at one time,” Allison said. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Well, she did and she even survived,” Jason replied, clicking on the only result from his search. “And now one of them has been kidnapped by an international terrorist and another has run off to try and find him on his own.”

“Why would a terrorist kidnap your brother?” Allison asked skeptically.

“He’s one of those Avenger superheroes,” Casey answered. “The archer that no one can ever seem to get a clear image of.”

“How do you know all about this?” Allison questioned Casey, a hint of jealousy in her voice.

“I asked her to come over for Thanksgiving,” Jason replied coolly. “Considering you couldn’t come and all.”

“Jason,” Allison said in a frustrated whisper. “I told you I want to keep our relationship on the lay low. I thought you agreed with me! It would look kind of suspicious if we both suddenly took a week off at the same time.”

“Oh no, I get it,” Jason answered, although there was a hard edge to his voice. “But you should have no problem with me bringing Casey along. My brothers keep bugging me about bringing someone over and Casey was available. You don’t have to come; I don’t look like a complete loser without any friends. It’s a win-win situation. Although, you know, some of my brothers are starting to wonder if you actually exist.”

“Wait a second,” Casey hissed, keeping the conversation hushed so as not to attract the attention of the others working at their desks. “Are you just using me to make her jealous?”

“...Not completely,” Jason paused for a moment, giving Casey a calculating look before he continued. “You’re my partner. I trust you. I wouldn’t have brought you over to meet my brothers if I didn’t trust you. You two are the only people here who even know I have brothers,” Jason shrugged. “At the same time, I’d be lying if I said that I’d choose you over Allison. Satisfied?”

“I can work with that,” Casey replied, a contemplative look on her face.

“Great,” Jason said. “Now, we’ve actually got some work to do here, so let’s get to it.”

Agent Phil Coulson’s stomach was currently tying itself in knots. Almost eight hours had gone by since Clint’s disappearance and they’d hardly gotten anywhere. Well, that wasn’t completely true. They’d marked off a considerable amount of the globe with Tony, Bruce, and Benji running the facial recognition software at five times its normal speed with one hundred and thirty percent of its normal accuracy. Trying to trace Loki’s transportation magic, on the other hand, had been utterly useless. Loki, as proficient with magic as he was, had successfully tangled up the signal so well that they would have to run across the globe twice and in a large variety of circles before they actually got to Loki’s destination. Even if they were able to get to Loki’s destination in the end, he would probably be long gone. He might not even be in the same *dimension* for all they knew!

Phil internally shook his head, clearing it. No! He couldn’t think like that! They *would* find Clint, no matter what it took to do so! Phil knew that even if SHIELD finally cut off the search that he’d still have backup in the way of Clint’s brothers – they’d find Clint somehow. He felt something cold clench inside his chest as a small voice in the back of his mind asked him if they’d be finding Clint alive or dead. But, no: Clint was alive until Phil had concrete proof of the opposite. And if Loki had harmed one hair on *his* archer’s head...

Phil was allowed to call Clint “his” archer, at least in his head. As the Avengers’ handler, Clint *was* technically his archer. Plus, he’d been Clint’s personal handler before then, too. (Phil ignored the fact that he never called Natasha “his” assassin or Thor “his” alien or Bruce “his” giant green rage monster.)

God, this was like Bogota all over again. Bogota had been an utter *hell*. It was supposed to be simple – just take out a couple of middlemen involved in a human trafficking ring, but then... Well, someone must have tipped them off, because they were ambushed by a group who were decidedly *not* just a couple of sleazy guys involved on the fringes of some illegal operations. These people were *professionals*. Phil had managed to get away, merely by the fact that they’d made the mistake of sending half as many men after him as they had after Clint. Clint was not so lucky. He’d been held and tortured for five days before Phil had managed to get him out and to a seldom used safe house. Phil had then gone to take out whomever he’d missed the first time around, only to come back to find Clint with a body temperature of one hundred and six. Phil was just thankful that Clint had come out of that mission alive.

Phil was abruptly pulled out of his thoughts as Marta Shearing raced into the room. Her face was flushed from a mixture of running all the way from R&D, but also, Phil hope he was right about this, from the excitement of discovery. She abruptly thrust a StarkPad into his hands, looking at him eagerly for a moment.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Dr. Shearing, but all I know about genetics I learned in tenth grade biology,” he admitted, looking at her expectantly.

“This actually has less to do with biology and more to do with chemistry,” she started, trying to compose herself and reign in her excitement. “See, your other geneticists were confused by the high level of dubnium in the extracted DNA samples. What they were missing, though, is that it wasn’t the original element inside the DNA – it’s just the result of radioactive decay. I believe that what’s actually present in the DNA base pairs is an entirely new element that we haven’t been able to synthesize yet, most likely something that would fit in period fifteen in the periodic table, thus being able to replace some of the nitrogen in the base pairs.

“However, there must be some kind of stabilizing agent within Asgardian DNA, also, which I haven’t been able to find yet. See, elements that are that heavy have *incredibly* short radioactive half lives. Ununoctium, the largest element humans have been able to synthesize, has a half life of only 0.89 *milliseconds* before it decays into livermorium. That’s why we haven’t been able to detect this new element – it decays too quickly.

“The energy from the radioactive decay, though, is probably somehow connected to this Asgardian ‘magic’ too. I mean, they’d be burning up their own DNA, but if they could harness the energy released from it... Well, they’d have a pretty unique power source. What’s important to our cause, though, is the fact that, well, it’s radioactive decay. So, if Loki tries to use any more magic, we might be able to trace him by detecting the radiation.”

Phil nodded, soaking in what he could.

“Here,” he said, handing Marta his cell phone. “Call Dr. Banner and tell him what you’ve found. He’s a physicist and an expert on gamma radiation – see what he can do to help.”

“Okay,” she replied, scrolling through his contacts before hitting the one labeled as “Stark Tower,” pressing the phone to her ear and waiting patiently as it rung a few times before someone picked up.

Phil felt a little bit of the tension in him drain out as she began speaking with someone else in terms that went over his head (so either Stark or Banner). Phil turned back to desk, his entire body tensing again as he laid eyes on a small piece of paper that had not been on his desk ten minutes ago. With cautious hands, he picked it up. He felt his heart get caught in his throat as he read the two sentences written on the paper:

My little bird refuses to cooperate and I’ve grown impatient. You have one hour to tame him before I kill him.

Under this was written a cell phone number. It seemed utterly surreal in Loki’s complicated game of power, magic, and mind control. And what did Loki mean by “tame him”? “Kill him” was pretty straightforward, but... Phil’s stomach clenched and he looked over at Marta, still talking on his cell phone. He slowly walked over to her, catching her attention as he moved towards her.

“Marta, I need the cell phone for a moment,” he said calmly, nothing in his tone betraying his internal panic.

“Uh, wait a second Bruce,” she said into the phone, shooting Phil a confused look. “Agent Coulson needs to talk to you.”

“Can you track Loki in under an hour?” Phil asked as soon as he had the phone pressed to his ear, getting straight to the point.

“What?” Bruce said, clearly caught off guard. “No, probably not. We’re still trying to figure out what to look for in the first place.”

“Then don’t bother trying right now,” he sighed. He had expected that answer, but that didn’t mean he liked it one bit.

“What are you talking about?” Bruce said, concern in his voice. “Has something happened?”

“...Yes,” Phil answered after a moment. “We have one hour before Loki kills Clint.”

He heard Bruce suck in a sharp breath and for a moment he wondered if he should have told him about the new situation. He hoped he hadn’t just accidentally released the Hulk on Avengers Tower. However, Bruce seemed to have regained control of himself, or at least enough to say, “I’ll get back to work then,” and hang up.

Phil then made his way back over to his desk and carefully punched the numbers written on the slip of paper into his phone. He held the StarkPhone up to his ear as he waited for someone to pick up on the other end. It rang once, twice, three times before he heard a voice on the other end. And not the voice he had really wanted to hear.

“Agent Coulson,” Loki’s smooth voice greeted, strangely polite. “Thank you for calling.”

“What do you want from me?” Phil asked, cutting straight to the point again, not acknowledging Loki’s greeting.

“No small talk, then?” Loki said, and Phil could practically hear him smirking through the phone. “Well, what I want from you is fairly simple. I want you to convince your beloved pet to join my cause.”

“No,” Phil answered automatically, an instant reflex.

“Really? Is that your answer?” Loki asked, sounding mildly put out. “He only has two options you know, submit to me or die.”

“SHIELD doesn’t negotiate with terrorists,” Phil said, hearing the slight waver in his voice.

“Oh, but I’m not talking with SHIELD, am I?” Loki said smoothly. “I’m negotiating with Philip J. Coulson.”

Phil swallowed.

“Let me talk to him,” he said quietly.

He got no reply from Loki, although he did hear some sort of shuffling in the background – hopefully that was Loki handing over the phone to Clint. That at least meant that Loki wasn’t bluffing – Clint was still alive.

“Sir?” a weak voice croaked, the roughness of it sending shivers of dread throughout Phil’s body.

“Barton,” he replied softly. “Are you all right? Has he hurt you?”

“I’m alright, Sir,” Clint said after a moment. “A few bruises but nothing major.”

“Where are you?” Phil asked quickly. “Can you tell me where – ”

The phone connection suddenly went dead. Damn. It was stupid of him not to think that Loki would be closely monitoring the conversation, but he’d hoped that he would be able to get at least a little bit of information from Clint before Loki cut him off. He still had some time, though. Loki seemed pretty adamant about wanting Clint for himself, so that meant that he’d probably at least wait for the end of the hour before... before killing Clint. He still had forty five minutes. God, what could he possibly expect to do in just forty five minutes?

What if that was his last conversation with Clint – ever? As overwrought and cliché as it sounded, he was truly beginning to panic. He’d never told Clint he was in love with him. He’d had so many perfect opportunities over the years: at the waterfall in Maui just the two of them after a mission, as Clint was bleeding out in his arms in Abu Dhabi, that one New Year’s Eve they had spent together at the Eifel Tower after a mission in Paris, when Clint had rescued him from those drug smugglers in Budapest...

His hand clenched around the phone, grip getting tighter as he reeled from these thoughts. Phil gritted his teeth, quickly dialing the Avengers Tower again, impatiently tapping his foot as it rang. Come on! They really needed to hurry!

“Agent! Wait a second – I’m putting you on speaker phone,” Tony Stark’s voice sounded on the other end, completely devoid of his usual mocking sarcasm for once. “Is it true we only have one hour?”

“About forty five minutes now,” Phil admitted, not able to keep the tiredness out of his voice. “Loki contacted me. He says we have until then to convince Barton to become his little *pet*,” Phil practically spat the word out, “again or he’ll kill him.”

“So we – ” someone else, it sounded like John, began, only to be cut off by a more clipped British accent.

“Say that again,” Sherlock demanded. “Exactly what you said – say it again.”

“Uh,” Phil said, caught off guard. “We have forty five minutes to either convince Clint to join Loki otherwise Loki will kill him.”

“No – that’s not what you said before,” the British man snapped. “The part about Clint being Loki’s pet. Why did you say ‘pet’?”

“That’s what Loki referred to him as,” Phil replied, unsure exactly where this conversation was headed. “As a pet. He also referred to him as *my* pet.”

There was a momentary pause, during which Phil could swear that he could hear the gears spinning inside Sherlock’s head. What had he heard in that statement that everyone else had missed? What was so important about the wording of that statement?

“Son of a bitch,” Tony exclaimed suddenly. “You’re a fucking genius.”

“Agent Coulson, we know where Clint is,” Sherlock said.

Chapter 5: Character Masterlist

Chapter Summary

Okay, so for some reason whenever I try to edit chapter one NOTHING HAPPENS. So I'm adding on the character masterlist as a new chapter. Sorry people. This is not a new chapter. I hope this clears some stuff up.

Edit: I've added the actors for each of the characters, too, as per a reader's request.

Character Masterlist:

The Avengers:

Clint Barton: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) An agent of the espionage and defense organization SHIELD, Clint is an archer and sniper, who became a superhero and member of the Avengers team. He and his older brother Barney ran away from the orphanage and joined a circus, where Clint first learned to use a bow. However, when he discovered that his mentor, Swordsman (Jacques Duquesne), was stealing from the circus, he tried to turn him in. Swordsman didn't take to kindly to that and beat Clint up, their confrontation ending with Clint falling from the high wire while Barney looked on, both Swordsman and Barney scorning him and leaving him for dead. I'm diverging a bit from canon here, so Clint left the circus then and was found by James and John. From there, John took him in until Clint came of age and decided to join the army. He was recruited from the army by Coulson and joined SHIELD. He was most recently mind controlled by the Avengers' primary enemy, Loki, and was forced to attack the SHIELD base and kill some fellow SHIELD agents. Natasha managed to break him out of the mind control, but only after he did a significant amount of damage.

Natasha Romanov: (Actor: Scarlett Johansson) Also an agent of SHIELD and Avenger, Natasha was originally a Russian spy, trained from childhood to be a ruthless assassin by the "Black Widow" program – a name that she still carries with her. Clint was originally sent by SHIELD to kill her, but instead decided to bring her in as an asset. She's been a SHIELD agent ever since and a close friend of Clint's.

Bruce Banner: (Actor: Mark Ruffalo) Bruce is more well known for the "other guy" – the Hulk, who Bruce transforms into when he's angered. Bruce was originally a physicist working with gamma radiation, and was recruited into a program trying to recreate Captain America's "Super Soldier" serum. He tested it on himself, and it went terribly wrong, transforming him into the Hulk. Because of his dangerous transformations, General Ross and many other organizations tried to get rid of him, so he's spent the last few years hiding out around the world (most notably acting as a medical doctor in Calcutta). He was recruited into the Avengers by Natasha after Loki's initial attack against SHIELD.

Steve Rogers: (Actor: Chris Evans) More commonly known as Captain America, he's known as "the first Avenger." He's originally from the forties, but was frozen in the arctic for seventy years and defrosted by SHIELD after they found him. He was able to survive due to the "Super Soldier"

serum that was tested on him. He was small and sickly but had a strong sense of justice, and after being rejected multiple times by the army (to fight in WWII), he was chosen for the Super Soldier project. The serum enhanced him physically, making him near invincible.

Tony Stark: (Actor: Robert Downey Jr.) The son of Howard Stark and head of Stark Industries, Tony typically describes himself as a “genius-billionaire-playboy-philanthropist.” He’s incredibly smart and graduated from MIT at seventeen. He had a strained relationship with his detached father and is an alcoholic. Stark Industries was primarily a weapons manufacturing company, but after being kidnapped and tortured while in Afghanistan he completely stopped making weaponry and now focuses on arc-reactor technology. (An arc-reactor is an extremely powerful electromagnet that is a source of clean energy. Tony also has one imbedded in his chest that keeps the shrapnel in his chest from puncturing his heart.) He is also the superhero “Iron Man.”

Thor: (Actor: Chris Hemsworth) Thor is an alien prince from Asgard, a sort of parallel world populated by people with god-like powers and magic. He is the older brother of Loki, the Avengers’ prime adversary and, after being betrayed by his brother, wishes to heal his brother and accept him back in Asgard. He has a magical hammer than only he can lift and can control lightning. He’s in love with an astrophysicist named Jane.

Phil Coulson: (Actor: Clark Gregg) As the Avengers’ handler and a senior SHIELD agent, he’s Fury’s second in command (or possibly third, as we don’t know whether he or Maria Hill has a higher ranking). He was Clint’s handler and then both Clint and Natasha’s handler before taking up the post as the Avengers’ handler. Loki nearly killed him in the attack on the SHIELD helicarrier base, but (through magical fandom willpower) he survived. Despite the fact that he looks like an average businessman, he’s secretly badass, as shown in the movie *Thor* when he takes down two armed robbers with a bag of flour.

Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol:

William “Will” Brandt: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) Will is an analyst (actually, the *head* analyst) for the IMF. He originally was a field agent, but then quit field work when a mission went wrong, due to his decision to ignore his instincts and follow orders. The mission ended in the death of Ethan’s wife, how it was later revealed that her death was a set up in order for her to properly “disappear” so that Ethan could keep her safe – Will was just the unlucky agent who landed the mission. A few years later, Will and Ethan meet in Russia while Ethan is trying to recover missile launch codes from a Russian terrorist. Will ends up joining Ethan’s team (although they initially underestimated him, believing that he was just a paper pusher due to his status as an analyst) and they save the world. Yay. Will contemplates going back to being head analyst, but instead stays with Ethan’s team.

Ethan Hunt: (Actor: Tom Cruise) Ethan is the top agent in the IMF. He was formerly married to a civilian (non-IMF agent) named Julia, but in order to protect her from his vengeful enemies, they faked her death and separated. Ethan is prone to dangerous/risky actions during missions, but he seems to have an abundance of luck. His relationship with Will was originally rather hostile and tense, but once Will tells him about the Julia issue, they become more at ease with each other.

Jane Carter: (Actor: Paula Patton) Jane is another IMF field agent, who is currently a member of Ethan’s team, but formerly worked with other partner (Trevor Hanaway) who was killed by assassin Sabine Moreau. Jane struggles with her desire to kill Moreau throughout the mission in revenge, and eventually does push her out of a window to her death while defending Benji.

Benji Dunn: (Actor: Simon Pegg) Benji was originally just a tech specialist for IMF and only recently passed the test to become a field agent. He's the only one of the three (Will, Jane, and Benji) who's worked with Ethan in the past. Benji mainly works with the tech out in the field, hacking into security systems and such, but he's also helped with infiltration and one memorable time saved Will by shooting his assailant.

S.W.A.T.:

Brian Gamble: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) Brian is a SWAT agent, who can sometimes be a little rash and hot headed. He was initially kicked off the SWAT team because he disobeyed orders when trying to take out an armed bank robber, injuring a hostage in the process. On the other hand, the hostages were all saved and the criminal subdued, which might not have been the case if he had followed orders. He doesn't particularly get along with or respect Police Captain Fuller, which doesn't really help his situation. He tries to get his partner, Jim, to quit police work with him, but Jim decides to stay, causing Brian to accuse him of betraying him and selling him out to the press (that he injured a hostage). In the movie, Brian then breaks Montel, a French drug lord, out of police custody for the monetary reward Montel offered, however he's killed by Jim in the end. In this story, breaking Montel out of jail was a mission given to Brian by SHIELD and once that's explained, he's accepted back onto the SWAT team (see chapter one notes at the beginning for details).

Jim Street: (Actor: Colin Farrell) Jim is also a SWAT member and Brian's partner and best friend. He and Brian are both ex-Navy SEALs, also. Jim is more level headed than Brian, though, and more patient, as shown by how he accepts the grunt work he's been demoted to after the bank robber debacle.

Bourne Legacy:

Aaron Cross: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) Aaron is a genetically modified super spy with enhanced intelligence and physical abilities. He was a member of the CIA's top secret Outcome program, which made these super spies, however due to a leak the CIA terminated (quite literally) the project. Aaron manages to save Marta Shearing and they escape. It's also revealed that Aaron was taken into the program after nearly being killed by a roadside bomb while serving in the army in Iraq. Aaron also was born with an intellectual disability/mental retardation, and his army recruiter bumped up his test scores to allow him to enlist.

Marta Shearing: (Actor: Rachel Weisz) Marta is a geneticist who worked for the CIA doing research for Outcome. She tends to focus more on her research, though, than what her research is being used for, which she and Aaron often argue about. When Outcome is being shut down, however, she's the one scientist working for the program that survives, with Aaron's help, of course.

The Unusuals:

Jason Walsh: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) A former baseball player, Jason became a cop for the NYPD's second district when his girlfriend was murdered and the police documented it as a mugging gone wrong, when Jason knew it was planned. She was actually murdered because when Jason was in the minor leagues, he was paid by someone to purposely lose a few games. When he got to the majors, he refused to continue despite his briber's threats, leading to the person killing his girlfriend. As a cop working for the second precinct, he tends to get really strange cases. Casey is his partner and Allison Beaumont, one of the other cops, is his current girlfriend. He also owns a

diner that he opens whenever he feels like, however the only food he serves is whatever he feels like that day. His concoctions tend to be pretty weird. He can also be a bit of a troll.

Casey Shraeger: (Actor: Amber Tamblyn) Casey was formerly on the vice squad, but was transferred over to the second precinct following Jason's former partner's murder. The police chief also tasks her with finding out all of the other cops' secrets, trusting her because she came from a rich family but decided to become a cop out of a strong sense of justice. She was formerly a bit of a sexual deviant and currently has a boyfriend who's a well to do lawyer.

Sherlock:

John Watson: (Actor: Martin Freeman) A former army doctor, John was invalided out of the army after getting shot in the shoulder while treating a soldier at the front. He has a psychosomatic limp from this and also an intermittent hand tremor, preventing him from performing surgery, although both of these symptoms disappear when he's under pressure or in a dangerous situation. He was looking for someone to get a flat share with when a friend of his introduced him to Sherlock Holmes. They now share a flat and solve crimes together. While John typically comes off as ordinary and perhaps cuddly, he readily shot and killed a serial killer who was trying to murder Sherlock. (He'd barely known Sherlock for a full day.) John is still often viewed as a sort of keeper or conscience for Sherlock, though, telling him when something he says is inappropriate or cold. He also writes a blog about the cases they solve.

Sherlock Holmes: (Actor: Benedict Cumberbatch) Sherlock is a genius and what he refers to as a "Consulting Detective" – meaning he solves crimes when the police can't. He readily deduces things about people based on seemingly minute or inconsequential bits of information. He is a self diagnosed high functioning sociopath, and he has very little concept of social cues. He believes in science above all else and frequently performs bizarre experiments. (John often complains about the body parts he procures from the morgue and keeps in the fridge for these experiments.) Sherlock is also a former drug addict, although he's currently clean, unless you count his frequent use of nicotine patches.

Skyfall:

James Bond: (Actor: Daniel Craig) James Bond is an MI6 agent – the top MI6 agent, codename 007 (meaning he has a license to kill). He's a bit of a womanizer and can sometimes be considered a little old fashioned. He's on the more cold and detached side, but is without subtle humor and warmth to those he cares about. He recently faked his death after falling off a train into a river after being shot in the shoulder. When MI6 headquarters was attacked by a terrorist, however, he returned to help capture the terrorist. His shoulder was severely injured, though, and he lost considerable mobility and it still occasionally causes him pain.

Quillan "Q" Holmes: (Actor: Ben Whishaw) As the head of the Q, or "Quartermaster" branch, Quillan is in charge of all of MI6's cool tech, although his gadgets tend to have a more subtle flair than some of his predecessors'. He's still pretty young, probably in his early twenties, which makes his position all the more of an accomplishment, although James doubts him slightly because of it. He doesn't hold field agents in very high regard and he can be a bit naive at times, due to his inexperience. So far James seems to grudgingly accept him, although their relationship is still a little tenuous.

The Hurt Locker:

William James: (Actor: Jeremy Renner) The youngest of the brothers (last of the sextuplets), William is probably also the most reckless. He is a soldier in the US army, more specifically in an Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit. He disarms bombs. Slightly disturbingly, he keeps a “souvenir” from each bomb he disarms. He says it’s to remind himself that the bomb didn’t kill him. He tends to be abrasive, but he can be surprisingly caring, as shown by his strange friendship with Beckham, a young Iraqi boy. He serves multiple tours in Iraq, and in this story, he’s just shipped out to Afghanistan. He has a wife (although in this story, they’ve divorced) and a very young son. William, like John Watson, describes war as something he’s addicted to.

Chapter 6: Eight Minutes

Chapter Summary

Chapter Warnings: None? Little mentions of the violence from last chapter. One brief mention of child abuse (it's more implied than anything).

Oh, how could he have been so *oblivious*! Clint Barton's location had been practically calling out to him, yet he hadn't heard it. Looking back on it, that place should have been the first they looked, or at least within the top ten. Why had they spent all of this time on a wild goose chase around the globe when Clint had been right under their noses? How could Sherlock have missed this? The similarities between Moriarty and Loki were so glaringly *transparent*!

"Stupid! *Stupid!*" Sherlock exclaimed, barely resisting the urge to pull at his hair. "Loki is *exactly* like Moriarty. Of course he'd act in the same fashion!"

"What?" John said, turning to Sherlock, confused and concerned. "Like kidnapping me and attaching copious amounts of explosives to me?"

"When did this happen?" Will asked, turning a what-have-you-neglected-to-tell-us? look on John.

"Ah, it's not really important right now," John replied with a nervous edge to his voice. "I'll tell you later."

"It's so *simple*," Sherlock continued, refocusing everyone's attention on him. "I was not referring to the explosives, although I'm sure that there's still the possibility. No, I was referring to how they regard *humans*. To Loki this is all a game, and a personal one at that. He's not going for efficiency or maximum damage: he's going for personal shock value. He'd probably agree with Moriarty when he said that the point of this game is to 'burn the heart out of you.' He hasn't won unless you're broken.

"Which gets into how he views people. Like Loki said, he thinks of Clint as a 'pet' – meaning that this game is just as much about the 'owner' as it is about the 'pet.' Now, which one of us does he view as Clint's 'owner'? Agent Coulson, obviously."

"What?" Coulson said, unable to contain his exclamation, disgust clear in his voice. "How did he come up with *that* assumption?"

"You *are* his handler," Sherlock said. He probably would have shot Coulson a pointed look if they hadn't been doing this over the phone. "You're the one directly responsible for him, and you're one of the only people he takes orders from. You work with him most closely on a daily basis and interact with him regularly on both a professional and personal level. Why else did you think that Loki would contact you personally to try and convince Clint to join him?"

"It's all part of his game," Sherlock explained. "What better way to gain ownership of a new pet than to have the pet's current owner all but give the pet up? Even if the pet doesn't want to join its

new owner, then at least it feels like it's been betrayed by its old owner. And if, in the end, neither the pet nor the owner give in, then when the pet is killed the owner's left with the sense that it's their fault.

"Check your apartment, Agent Coulson," Sherlock concluded. "With the possibility that you wouldn't give in, Loki probably be there, or at least kill him there, in anticipation of you being the first one to find the body. He's probably been there the whole time, though. That way if you *did* end up finally giving up, then you'd come home to find out that Clint's cause wasn't quite as lost as you believed it to be."

People were scrambling out the door before Sherlock even finished.

"We only have twenty minutes!" Q exclaimed suddenly, his voice scratchy through the comms.

"I'm only a few blocks away, on street level," James announced, broken up a bit by static. "I'll take care of it."

"You don't know what you're dealing with," Steve protested, somehow having managed to suit up in less than two minutes. "Tony can fly – he'll be at Agent Coulson's apartment in just a few –"

"No," James said firmly. "He'll still be slower than me. If there's any chance that Loki might get impatient, then I'm going. I'm not a stranger to dangerous situations, sonny. This is as far as I follow your orders."

There was a small blip of static, and then James was gone.

This was a nightmare. A complete and utter *nightmare*. James had had to deal with psychos and sadists and terrorists before, but no matter how hard his enemies had tried to make the 'game' personal, they'd never really had the right leverage. They'd never really gotten their hands on anything or anyone that was truly precious to James. He'd honestly never felt so panicked before. The only other times that had even come close were when Clint and Barney had disappeared from the orphanage and when Aaron had been declared dead from the roadside bombing in Iraq. And even then, those were different.

See, Aaron's death came completely out of the blue. Well, perhaps *completely* is a bit of an over exaggeration – James knew all of the risks of the army (objectively, at least). He'd been horrified when he found out that Aaron had enlisted. A part of him irrationally wondered if Aaron had done it just to spite him after all the extra measures James had taken to keep him safe. It was a completely stupid idea, but it was present none the less. Slowly, James had gotten, well, not exactly *comfortable with* but *used to* the knowledge that Aaron was in the army. Aaron's supposed 'death' was a harsh blow. James wasn't a stranger to failure but right then it felt like more than failure. In some ways it felt like he'd killed Aaron with his own hands.

As strange as it might sound, Clint and Barney's disappearance from the orphanage wasn't as hard on him. That may sound fucked up and cold, but it was all about the initial shock. The *aftermath* of the incident was much worse. The reason that James hadn't been as worried or scared about his younger brothers' disappearances was because he knew they had each other. Or so he'd thought. He'd trusted Barney to take care of Clint, trusted that they'd watch each other's backs and that they'd stick together – that they'd make it until he could find them. God, was he wrong.

A cold, dark part of him will never, *ever* forgive Barney for what he did. It clenches around his heart whenever he sees Clint in pain, whenever he sees the scars upon Clint's body or hears Clint's violent nightmares. He's never sat with Clint through one of his night terrors. He doesn't trust himself to not do something that he'll end up regretting. Comforting is John's job. John's good at it; he's softer than James. Or, at least, that's what James tells himself. A part of him whispers, probably correctly, that he's just running away again.

James still can't understand why Barney did it – why he let it happen. Maybe that's too harsh a judgment, but James is nothing if not ruthless. The older brother in him wants to protest that Barney was young, scared, and abused. It's not like James hasn't stood by before as fellow agents have been tortured, killed, or worse.

But none of those were his brother. If it'd been John or Will or Jason or any of them he'd never let it happen. *Never*. Barney led young, impressionable Clint away to the circus and watched as he was manipulated, abused, and nearly killed, and did nothing because he was *jealous* and *vindictive* and *bitter*. Barney walked away with the man who pushed Clint off the high wire as Clint lay injured and bleeding on the ground. James' black soul can't forgive him for that.

But this, right now, was so much worse. As he raced through the streets of New York City, the address of one Philip J. Coulson running on a loop in his head, he felt like he was slowly suffocating – like with every crawling second a little bit more of his life force was squeezed out of his body, telling him that any effort he made was futile. He knew, logically, that the likelihood of him taking out Loki to rescue Clint in under fifteen minutes was highly unlikely, but he would never forgive himself if he failed.

But if he did fail...there was nowhere in the entire universe where Loki would be safe. James wouldn't hesitate to kill him with his bare hands. There would be *nothing* that could hold him back.

James' heart pounded in time with his rapid footsteps, ascending the stairs at a speed only achieved by the hopelessly desperate. He'd never felt so out of control in his life. Even as he fell hundreds of feet off a moving train with a bullet in his shoulder, he hadn't felt desperate. Detached, clinical. He hadn't felt so conflicted since his adopted parents had died when he was eleven. He'd locked himself in the secret passage (the priest hole) of Skyfall manor for days before he'd sorted himself out enough to integrate himself back into the world. He didn't have that luxury now. He'd have to face the situation without a handle on his emotions, without his calm mask and without cold, rational thought. Emotion was a volatile fuel and James wasn't entirely sure this wouldn't blow up in his face.

But he didn't have time to think about that now. He burst into the hallway, not taking the time to move quietly or mask his presence – it wouldn't matter either way. He rushed down the hallway to Agent Coulson's apartment, preparing to break down the door, but checking to see if it was unlocked anyway.

James felt something inside his chest tighten as the door opened with ease, the handle turning readily under his gun callused fingers. Fearing the worst, James stepped inside and surveyed the scene, taking in the situation quickly.

The first thing that struck him was that Loki was nowhere to be found. He supposed that that shouldn't be too surprising, considering how he only had about ten minutes left before the time was up. He desperately hoped that he wasn't too late. Loki had proved to be finicky so far, and James was unsure how closely he would stick to the rules of his little game, no matter that he had created

them himself. Time was ticking away and the coldly rational part of James' mind told him that he was probably too late.

James moved from the hallway, navigating around the many moving boxes that Agent Coulson's things had been stored in while he'd been considered "dead." He walked carefully into the living room of the relatively small apartment, eyes falling immediately on the prone figure lying on the navy blue couch in the middle of the room. Clint.

James quickly checked that there was no one else in the vicinity before rushing over to Clint, who was lying face down. James took his brother's pulse with surprisingly steady hands, relieved when he located it – a little shallow, but present all the same. He then carefully turned Clint over onto his back to assess him for any additional damage, noting the red marks on his neck. What James saw nearly made his heart stop.

As a secret agent and member of MI6, James was no stranger to dangerous situations. He was no stranger to difficult but necessary sacrifices, and he was certainly no stranger to bombs. This, though... this was completely different.

Attached to Clint's chest was a crude looking bomb. Not some high tech gadget made by the Q branch or sleek bug created by any of MI6's rival agencies. This was almost primitive, clunky – something that he'd expect to hear about William over in Afghanistan and Iraq disarming. It was certainly no less dangerous than the espionage quality explosives that James had encountered in the past, and the worst part of it was that, despite everything that he'd had to deal with as an MI6 operative, he'd never had to disarm a bomb. Get rid of, yes. Incapacitate, yes. Disable? Never, and certainly nothing of this make.

James' eyes caught on a glow emitting from the side of bomb, blue and foreign. Any hope of getting the bomb off of Clint's chest dissipated then, as James realized that the glow could be nothing but magic. Loki clearly didn't want this coming off of Clint. Also glowing an eerie blue, projected into the air, a counter ticked down the seconds until what James could only assume would be his demise. Ten minutes left.

James did the only thing he could do. He made a phone call.

The line rung and rung, the strange and uncommon feeling of fear tightening in James' chest as each second escaped from him. His hand tightened unconsciously around the phone. Had James been the praying type, he would have done so right then. On the other end, someone picked up.

"Yeah?" a rough and sleepy sounding voice asked, a hint of annoyance present.

"I need to know how to disarm a bomb," James replied immediately, leaving no room for pause or doubt.

"James? You need *what*? What the hell is going on?" the other man questioned, waking up more, but still clearly disoriented. "Don't you have a secret agent support group for this or something? How do you even know I'll be able to help you? I don't know anything about your high tech secret agent bombs!"

"It's Clint," James said, voice sharp and steady despite his internal turmoil. "It's attached to Clint, and it's not some high tech bomb – it looks like it's made out of an artillery shell."

“Fucking *hell*,” William breathed, the sound half caught in his throat. “Look, just – get it off Clint and make a fucking run for it! Call 911! I can’t fucking tell you how to disarm an IED over the fucking *phone*!”

“I *can’t* get it off of him,” James snapped, impatience sizzling. “I have eight minutes until this thing explodes and I’m in the middle of an apartment building in New York City. I need you to stop panicking and *tell me what to do*. I don’t have time for this.”

“Fuck. Shit – I...” James heard William swallow uncomfortably. “Okay. I need you to describe the bomb to me. Are there any wires sticking out?”

James carefully examined the explosive device strapped to his little brother, eyes steady and completely focused as he observed. He made no attempt to touch Clint or the bomb, not wanting to risk jostling either one. He was, for once, totally out of his depth and that was making him hyper vigilant. The tightness in his chest increased slightly as he looked on, his brother’s brow uncomfortably furrowed. He couldn’t let that distract him, though. He needed to treat this like any other situation. Just like work. It was just another mission.

“One end of the shell has five different wires protruding from it,” James answered, his voice as steady as his eyes. “Two are yellow, but the others are green, red, and blue.”

“The colors don’t matter right now,” William informed him, cutting James off. “Can you see where they lead to? At least one of them should be connected to an electric firing circuit – some sort of activation device.”

“Give me a moment to find – ” James started, looking for the ends of the wires, however he quickly cut himself off, his eyes growing dark and expression tight.

The ends of the wires clenched in the MI6 operative’s gun callused hands literally disappeared into thin air. Perhaps they were just invisible, but either way, it was going to be a hell of a lot harder to find the firing circuit now. How was he supposed to describe the bomb to William now? He had no way to verify that what he found, even if he could physically *feel* it, was the firing circuit if he couldn’t see it to describe it to William. There went his lifeline.

He fucking *hated* magic. He’d never been so useless before in his entire life! He quickly glanced over to the slowly counting timer, glowing blue in the dim light of Agent Coulson’s living room, eerie and daunting. James’ hands were tense and he tried to suppress these thoughts. He tried to focus himself, reminding himself of how many lives were at stake – the amount of damage this bomb could cause. However, the only life he could focus on was that of his little brother. Clint looked so *small* lying here at an awkward angle on the navy blue couch.

The realization of how stacked against them the odds were hit James in such a way that it felt like all the oxygen had just been sucked out of his chest. He’d never felt so *old*, so *tired* before. A dim part of his mind asked where the adrenaline had gone, the high of the fight that had kept him in the stress filled spy game as long as it had. James became distinctly aware of the ache in his shoulder then, a dull throb that reminded him of how out of the game he was. Would he get his younger brother killed because of the incompetence that he’d let build in himself over these past few months (years, even)?

His mind automatically flashed to an image of Ethan Hunt: enthusiastic, daring, risk taking. Truthfully, Ethan was not that much younger than James himself. He hadn’t been in the espionage business for as long as James of course, but somehow it seemed that Ethan had managed to retain

something, some spark, that James had not. There was no doubt in James' mind that if Will was in Clint's position right now, that it would be Ethan here first – not James, and that Ethan would certainly be doing something stupid and risky right now in the name of saving Will. Fuck – he needed to *do* something!

“James? James!” William's voice broke into James' increasingly self destructive thought process, anxiety in his tone. “What the fuck is going on there?”

“There's been a slight complication,” James answered, clearing his throat. “I can't find the ends of the wires and I also can't find the electric firing circuit.”

“What?” William replied, confused. “It's gotta be there somewhere. Are you sure you've checked everywhere? In the furniture, walls - *everywhere*.”

“William,” James said, pausing for a moment, unsure how to phrase this. “The situation's a little more complicated than that. You see, the wires become...invisible, per say. They disappear. I can't feel where they are, either, so it's more than just invisibility, also. They just stop.”

“What the fuck?” William exclaimed. “I thought you said this wasn't one of your high tech spy thingies!”

“It's not,” James answered, tone cold. “It's, for a lack of a better term, magic.”

“Fucking hell – am I supposed to believe that shit?” William said, a hint of impatience and what might be hysteria in his voice. “I get that you can't talk about your job, but I need to know what this is so I can help you. Stop giving me this bullshit!”

“It's not,” James said through clenched teeth. “Remember the alien attack on New York three months ago? Apparently the instigator has an unhealthy interest in Clint. I don't have time to explain further at this moment. Is there any other way to diffuse the bomb?”

“Well, yeah, maybe, but I've told you – I can't do this over the phone!” William replied, his voice just the wrong side of frantic. “The only other way is to remove the explosives from the shell, but, James, you have no fucking clue what you're doing! Even if I was physically there with you I'd be able to do shit without the proper equipment! Just – ”

But whatever William was about to say was cut off abruptly as a wave of pressure swept over the area, catching James off guard and crushing him to the floor of the apartment, the phone short circuiting in his hand. James actually blacked out for a moment at the force of the invisible blow, but he managed to push through, taking large gulps of air and struggling to reposition himself in an upright stance again. When he looked over at Clint, he was surprised at what he saw. The formerly invisible wires had somehow reappeared, as easily visible as, well, everything else in the room now. The bright blue timer floating above the bomb had also disappeared, but James had no doubt that it was still ticking.

The MI6 operative quickly glanced around for his phone, his heart sinking as he saw the remains of it, lying in pieces where it had been smashed against the hardwood floor of the apartment. He didn't have time for this, though. There was no telling now how much time he had left, but there was no question in James' mind that he had to move quickly. His rough hands gently tugged at the wires, following them as they snaked around the floor, out of the living room, down the hallway, and into a dimly lit room near the back of the apartment. There, in the center of what could only be Agent Coulson's bed, lay a small black box of some sort. The red, green, and one of the yellow

wires were all attached to it, held together with a liberal amount of duct tape. James, very carefully, held it up.

What should he do now? Cut the wires? William hadn't gotten to that part yet. Should he cut all of them or just one? Two maybe? Which two, then? The red one? James glanced at his watch, quickly calculating how much time he had left before the detonation of the bomb. Approximately two minutes. James dug a small knife out of the folds of his jacket, holding it steadily in his hands. He didn't feel nearly as steady as his hands looked. James sucked in a deep breath, his hand clenching around the knife. He took the wires in his hand, holding them up and sliding the blade of the knife under them.

James cut all three wires in one smooth motion.

Clint was surprised. He hadn't expected Hell to feel quite so comfortable. Or, well, *normal*, because, really – while it was fluffier than he expected, it still had the stiffness of a hospital bed. Maybe working for SHIELD had helped him out a bit after all. Truthfully, he'd never expected SHIELD to clean up his debts or make him a better person or anything, but, you know, maybe it had actually helped a little bit. If Hell was minor annoyances like hospital beds, then he could make it. He could live like this for eternity, he supposed. It wouldn't be a particularly nice existence, but this *was* Hell, after all.

Clint was glad that he at least got to spend his last day with his brothers. With that, Clint carefully opened his weighted eyelids and looked around the room.

Oh.

Clint Barton, was, in fact, in a hospital room. A very, *very* crowded hospital room. He blinked again, just to make sure that everyone he was seeing was actually there. He could understand his brothers, of course, and Natasha wasn't that uncommon a sight at his bedside, but everyone else? Well, last month when he'd taken a bad blow to the head and had been knocked out, making it so that he had to be kept at the hospital overnight, the rest of the Avengers had rotated through to check up on him. Coulson had also, much to Clint's (internal) delight, dropped in for a debriefing and stayed to chat for a while. So maybe it wasn't *too* much of a stretch to see them in here.

The others, though... Well, they hardly even knew him! They were probably here to support his brothers more than him, but just seeing everyone here made a strange sense of warmth bubble up inside of him. He blinked again, though, when his eyes landed on a few additional people. He was pleasantly surprised to see Pepper Potts sitting next to Tony – Clint had often found her to be a wonderful conversationalist and a generally pleasant presence (although, he supposed, you kind of had to be to have enough patience for Tony Stark). Fury, Sitwell, and Hill had also paused in the doorway, but they weren't the cause of Clint's third surprised blink.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" Clint asked, not expecting the roughness of his voice, stopping for a moment to clear his throat. "I've died and somehow made it to Heaven because physics has stopped working. There is *no way* that this many people can fit into this tiny hospital room, seeing as there are twenty six of you. Also, *you*," he said, gesturing at William, "are supposed to be in Afghanistan. Which is halfway around the world. So I'm dead and Heaven is a hospital. Or you're all going to die in increasingly depressing ways and I'll know I'm in Hell."

“It’s a very large hospital room,” Natasha said simply from where she was neatly curled up in an uncomfortable looking chair next to his left elbow. “That, and you’ve been out for the past twenty hours.”

“Twenty hours?” Clint repeated, a little dazed. “... Your butt’s probably lost all feeling. Permanently.”

“We’re dedicated, but we’re not *that* dedicated,” Brian laughed, drawing Clint’s eyes to where he was leaning on the window.

“Your heart monitor started going haywire half an hour ago,” Phil explained, his voice a touch softer than usual, causing the butterflies in Clint’s stomach to do summersaults. “When we took your pulse manually it was fine, though.”

“It probably had something to do with your stalker’s creepy voodoo tricks,” Tony piped in, tapping the machinery in question. “As soon as you woke up it went completely back to normal. Well, as normal as non-Stark tech goes, that is. You know, maybe I should expand into Loki proof medical technology. What do you think, Pep?”

“I think that it might be a good idea to try your hand at regular medical technology before going directly to magic resistant devices,” Pepper supplied, turning to Clint. “How are you feeling now?”

“Uh, fine,” Clint replied, flattered by her concern. “Really good, actually, considering.”

“Oh, so you’re okay, but the rest of us are recovering from heart attacks,” a voice on the other side of the room said, drawing Clint’s eyes over to him. It was William. Clint still didn’t know how he’d gotten here.

“How’d you get here?” Clint asked, blinking again to clear his head. William was still there.

“I took a plane,” William replied, a lopsided grin on his face. “I may have had a little bit of help from your alphabet soup agency, though.”

“Did you...?” Clint began, unsure exactly how to ask what he wanted to ask. He wasn’t even sure he hadn’t just dreamt it (or that Loki had *made* him dream it).

“Diffuse the bomb?” William finished bluntly. “Not really. I was spending my little bit of downtime trying to get some sleep only to have James suddenly ring me up out of nowhere on the emergency line raving about how you’ve gotten a goddamn terrorist worthy bomb attached to your fucking chest.”

Clint couldn’t really image James raving in any sense of the word, but he got the general idea.

“Of course, when I tried to walk him through the disabling process he started going on about magic and how part of the goddamn bomb was *invisible*,” William continued, his tone still a bit incredulous. “Next thing I know there’s a crash of some sort and the connection shorts out. The only reason you got out of that alive is because James is luckier than the fucking *devil*.”

“Basically, James diffused it but he really just cut some wires and hoped that they were the right ones,” Jason summarized.

“How’d you do that if they were invisible?” Clint asked, morbidly curious.

“Thor managed to get in contact with Asgard and was able to get Odin to use a spell which is pretty much the magic equivalent of an electromagnetic pulse and it basically short circuited Loki’s magic,” Bruce explained, beating Tony to the explanation this time. “Unfortunately, when it interacts with the magic, though, it sends out a bit of an energy wave, which is what caused James to drop his cell phone and cut off the connection.”

“...So that spell could have killed me just as easily as it saved me?” Clint clarified.

“Pretty much,” Tony chirped, far too chipper. “But it didn’t so one for us, nil for Loki. Although, once you think about it, it’s really two for us and nil for Loki once you take his first kidnapping into account. You know, as a fellow Avenger, I feel that you probably should have warned the team that you’re prone to being kidnapped. Just so, you know, we’re aware and can be prepared. You know I could get you some extra strength pepper spray – ”

“Aaand that’s enough of that,” Pepper cut in seamlessly. “It’s wonderful to know that you’re alive and well, Clint, but I think I need to get Tony back to Avengers Tower in time for his nap before conferences. Feel free to call us if you need anything, although we’ll probably be back relatively soon, knowing Tony.”

“I’ll send you a card,” Tony called as Pepper dragged him out of the room. “It’ll probably be custom, because I don’t think Hallmark makes ‘good luck with therapy after being kidnapped by a psycho alien overlord’ cards!”

Once Tony and Pepper had cleared out, Fury stepped into the room, motioning for agents Hill and Sitwell to get back to their duties while he took care of business. He closed the hospital door firmly behind him, turning to Clint, his posture rigid and hands clasped together behind his back, a serious expression on his face.

“You know, Agent Barton, I think I’ve finally figured out why whenever I get an unexpected call from Agent Coulson you’re the reason behind it,” Director Fury said, some humor leaking into his deadpan tone. “It’s genetic.”

Clint stiffened slightly at Director Fury’s words, automatically glancing over at his brothers before turning back to Fury, his tone joking when he replied, “You two gossip about me? Should I be offended or flattered?”

“Agent, what I’m curious about it how you managed to conveniently forget that you have seven brothers when filling out the required SHIELD forms,” Fury continued, ignoring Clint’s quip.

“That’s my doing, Director...?” James interrupted, taking a step towards Clint, positioning himself more between Fury and his younger brother.

“Director Fury, although I suspect you already know that, double o seven,” Fury replied, shooting the eldest Barton brother an unimpressed look.

“You’re an intelligence agency,” Brian butted in, a tad obnoxiously. “Isn’t it *your* job to keep track of all the private little details of your agents’ lives? You know, making sure they aren’t reporting back to their cousin in soviet Russia.”

“The Soviet Union was disbanded in nineteen ninety one,” Will muttered, and Clint wasn’t entirely sure if he really did feel the need to be so precise or if he just said it to get on Brian’s nerves. It really could go either way.

“Member of the Taliban, then,” Brian shot back, glaring at Will who let out a little annoyed huff in response.

Clint rolled his eyes, but by Natasha’s expression he wasn’t entirely able to keep the amused smile off his face. Jim, who was standing next to Brian (as per usual), put a hand on Brian’s shoulder, pointedly pulling him back a few steps, away from Will. Ethan mirrored Jim’s movements, although he might have been just a little bit more...*tactile*. Aaron shot the IMF agent a look and he quickly dropped his hand, taking a step away from Will himself. Ah, they were adorable.

“As I was saying,” Fury started again, looking disgruntled, only to be, once again, cut off.

“Can this wait until Monday?” Clint asked, trying not to sound like he was whining. “Or at least Friday? I have this week off, remember, so I don’t technically have to listen to you. Stop ruining my vacation.”

Okay, so maybe he was whining just a little bit.

“An attack by Loki – ” Fury began (*again*), only to be cut off (*again*).

“Sir, if I get kidnapped on my own time, then I can deal with it on my own time. You’ve been a great help, thank you for that, but right now I just want to go home and relax. Sleep or something,” Clint sighed.

“Technically, SHIELD didn’t find you. That was pretty much all on John’s friend Sherlock here,” Aaron said, motioning to said man, who appeared to be bored out of his mind, currently. “Who I am very, very glad that John brought along. Seriously, even if you two have some sort of falling out, you have an open invitation.”

“...Thank you,” Sherlock said after being elbowed not so surreptitiously by John. “Although corpses are also highly appreciated thank you gifts.”

Everyone stared at him for a moment.

“For experiments,” John said quickly, realizing that Sherlock’s statement probably sounded rather dubious to people who didn’t really know him that well. Although “for experiments” probably didn’t sound much better. “You know, because he’s a detective and he does research on corpses to try and confirm alibis and such...”

Comprehension dawned on the faces of the other people in the room as they digested John’s words. That made a lot more sense. Granted, it was still a little wired. And creepy. But it made sense, at least.

“You know, at this rate, we’re going to need another refrigerator,” John joked, smiling at Sherlock.

Okay, back to creepy. Because bodies in the fridge? Ew. Clint had seen some pretty disgusting things, but there was something fundamentally wrong about keeping body parts where you kept your food. Maybe it was a scientist thing. Clint was really glad that Pepper had dragged Tony away already, because he really didn’t want their resident mad scientist to get any ideas. Maybe John could tolerate it, but corpses in the fridge just reminded Clint of some gruesome serial killer. (What did that say about his brother when Clint – the *sniper/assassin* – was squicked by it and John wasn’t?)

It was kind of cute to see them bantering, though, John and Sherlock. Clint was pretty sure that there wasn't any romantic or sexual component to their relationship yet, but he couldn't help but envy how obviously comfortable they were around each other. It wasn't that he and Phil didn't feel comfortable around each other and it wasn't that they didn't trust each other implicitly, but whenever Clint started getting too close (physically and/or emotionally) to Phil he'd suddenly be blindsided by the overwhelming force of pure *attraction* (sexual and romantic) that he felt for the other man. This made him awkward and unsure and in his panic to stifle his emotions he typically did or said something that just ended up pushing Phil further away from him. Clint wished so much that he could go back to the stage that John was in, where the attraction was certainly there, but he hadn't yet realized it and it didn't get in the way of his, well, *life*.

Because that's what Phil was – his life. Phil had recruited him; Phil had shown him the ropes; Phil had been his handler for so long Clint had almost lost track; Phil had saved his life time and time again; and really, there was hardly a day that went by without Phil's voice in his ear, Phil's presence by his side, Phil's little handwritten sticky notes stuck to stacks of paperwork. Clint was so completely *screwed*. His entire life had become someone who'd never love him back. God, he was pathetic.

"Barton, are you feeling alright?" a voice – *Phil's* voice – broke into Clint's thoughts.

"Huh? What?" Clint replied eloquently, valiantly trying not to blush. He wasn't entirely sure how successful he was.

"You looked kind of out of it there," Steve broke in, also looking at Clint with a concerned expression. "Any dizziness? Nausea or headache? Are you feeling disoriented?"

Clint blinked at Steve owlishly. He had not expected Steve to turn into some kind of worried nursemaid, but considering what he knew about Steve's past as a sickly little stick, he supposed it kind of made sense. You tended to learn at least a little bit about medicine when you had as many assorted ailments as pre-serum Steve did.

"Uh, no. Just lost in thought," Clint answered, plastering a half hearted smile on his face to placate his teammates. "Nothing to worry about. I'm feeling great actually, all things considered. Is there any paperwork I need to fill out for a hospital release form?"

"No," Will replied firmly, frowning.

"That's great," Clint said, smile a tad more genuine than before. "Well then, I'll just –"

"I didn't mean 'there's no paperwork' – I meant 'no, you're not getting released from this hospital yet,'" Will clarified, walking scooting his chair closer to Clint's bed so that he could push him back down as Clint tried to sit up get out of bed. "You've just been mysteriously unconscious for twenty straight hours. You're not going anywhere."

Clint was actually kind of grateful that Will had pushed him back down onto the bed so quickly. It would be so awkward if he fell off the bed just after he'd said that he was perfectly fine. Because that's certainly what would have happened. As soon as he'd tried sitting up, it had felt like all of his energy had been sucked out of him. His breathing felt heavier, like when Natasha got annoyed with him for sleeping in too late and sat on his chest when he refused to get out of bed. (Natasha may look small, but absolutely all of her was muscle. He was a lot heavier than she looked.) His muscles ached, although he couldn't recall doing anything that would possibly cause that feeling – really all

he'd done yesterday was climb the fence at the Empire State Building and then lie on a couch after getting kidnapped. Was he really that out of shape?

"Clint," John said, concern clear in his voice. "Really, are you okay?"

"I – " he started, but his tongue felt as heavy and tired as the rest of his body and he had to struggle to form the words with exhausted mouth.

Everyone was immediately crowded around him, Bruce taking his pulse on his left arm and John automatically doing the same on his right, both having done so unconsciously before realizing they didn't both need to take his pulse. Everyone else was hovering nervously (well, Sherlock and Q didn't look all that nervous or concerned, but he didn't know them all that well and they both seemed to be a bit on the strange side).

"I just feel..." Clint said, struggling through the words, feeling like he was trying to talk around a mouthful of thick, sticky molasses. "Tired. Just – tired."

Both John and Bruce didn't seem overly concerned about whatever readings they'd taken of his pulse, but when Clint glanced over at his older brother after admitting his weakness, he was met with a conflicted expression, John's lips pressed in a thin line and his brow furrowed.

"I fear that that is a consequence of Loki's magic," Thor said with surprising softness. He'd been abnormally quiet so far – Clint had almost forgotten about him. "He cast a spell of sleep over you in order to restrain you and while my father's own spell is at work destroying the remaining traces of Loki's magic, it is a strong enchantment that my brother used. It will take time to fully restore you, Hawk."

"So, you can stay in the hospital for the next few days or we can hunt around for your true love to give you a nice wet kiss on the lips," Jason said, a slight smile on his face. "Take your pick. Although you should probably know, if you decide on the second option and words gets out about it, you'll probably have a pretty long line of eligible young suitors lined up at the door, the majority of them probably just in it for a free kiss."

"I think I'll take option one," Clint replied dryly. "Swenson from R&D has been giving me odd looks recently."

"Don't worry, we'll protect your virtue," Natasha said mock seriously, running a hand through his hair.

"You're more likely to sell my virtue to the highest bidder," Clint grumbled, pouting at her. Natasha made no effort to refute his statement.

"As intriguing as your virtue is, Agent Barton," Fury said, fond annoyance in his voice, "Loki is still a serious threat. We've saved you from his evil clutches for now, but he's an international – or, rather, interdimensional – criminal and he's still at large. And, if his little crush on you persists, then you're still at risk."

"Sir, I'm pretty sure whatever 'crush' he had on me ended when he plastered a bunch of explosives to my chest," Clint answered, a wry smile on his face.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Phil interjected, what might be – if Clint hoped hard enough – worry on his face. "I think that the fact that you survived will just make Loki want to get at you more. He seems

to be a bit of a sore loser.”

“Speaking of which, what the hell was up with those explosives?” Fury asked, clearly unhappy with how little information he was running on. “Loki couldn’t care less about our ‘petty primitive technology’ and then all of the sudden he’s using cell phones and trying to blow my agents up with homemade bombs?”

“IED,” William corrected.

Everyone turned to stare at him questioningly. William’s eyebrows raised a bit at all the attention, but he didn’t appear self conscious and he didn’t shy away.

“Improvised Explosive Device,” he explained. “It’s the proper term. Of course, the only reason I know that is because ninety nine percent of the bombs we deal with over in Iraq and Afghanistan are exactly like the one you pulled off of Clint.”

“It’s all about his silly little game,” Sherlock huffed from where he stood next to John, the tone of his voice and his body language all screaming ‘BORED!’ “He probably knew that one of Clint’s brothers disarmed these sorts of bombs for a living, which would make blowing Clint up all the more traumatic seeing as the one brother who could save him is also the one brother who’s halfway around the world. Again, going for the dramatic.”

“That’s messed up,” Benji said after a moment of silence, scrunching up his nose in disgust. “I mean, I get that he’s psychotic and all, but it’s still kind of disturbing, you know? He must have some serious brother issues – ” he said, a little jokingly, only to be cut off by glares from the rest of the Avengers.

“That is my brother, of whom you speak,” Thor said in a surprisingly neutral tone, a hint of sadness in it.

“Oh. Um. Sorry. That really wasn’t a judgment of your character or, you know, your brother skills or anything. Really,” Benji stuttered, backpedaling quickly at Thor’s downtrodden concession. “I’ll just shut up now.”

“No, it is true,” Thor said, looking more and more like a sad puppy. A golden retriever, maybe. “I failed in my duties as a brother and as a friend.”

“Hey, stop looking so mopey,” Clint said in a light tone, giving Thor a reassuring smile. “You’ve tried to make amends, and, yeah, maybe you let him down a bit at the beginning, but you’ve realized that and you’re trying to make things right. The ball’s in Loki’s court now.”

Thor gave him an unsure, but slightly happier nod in response. Clint counted that as some sort of a win. He had to struggle to not make the heaviness of his breaths obvious, though. He’d only said a few sentences, but the exhaustion settling in his lungs was akin to how he felt after going a good long round with Natasha on the training mats. And all he did was get knocked out! Boy was he out of shape.

Clint froze for a split second as he saw James’ eyes catch on him calculatingly. Hopefully his older brother hadn’t noticed how much he was struggling. He’d already put his brothers through enough worry today (and, well, yesterday, too, considering how long he’d been out) and he didn’t want them panicking over something that they had no way of solving. Like Thor had said, it was caused by magic. There wasn’t much they could do about that, unless one of them was secretly a sorcerer

or something. It would probably be best to just smile and act like normal. Clint was pretty sure they all needed a little bit of normal right about now.

“Okay, guys. Time to break me out of here,” he said, grinning. “There are twenty one of you and only one Director Fury. Nat, you can forge the signatures on the paperwork, right?”

She shot him a look that translated roughly to: “Did you lose some of your memory along with twenty hours of your life? I can forge your crappy chicken scratch signature in my *sleep*.”

Wasn’t she just a dear?

“Hold it right there, Barton,” Fury barked, frustration clear in his tone, giving it a sharp edge. “I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough. What the fuck do I need to say to you for you to *get* this? Loki may pretend that this is some sort of game, but it stopped being one the moment he threatened one of *my* agents. Do you *want* to become one of his personal flying monkeys? Because that’s what it looks like from where I’m standing.”

“Sir, I could make a ton of jokes about the state of your one-eyed vision right now,” Clint joked, although something in his chest tightened painfully at the mere thought of Loki.

“I will confine you to the helicarrier by force if I have to,” Fury answered, his voice portraying his steely, no nonsense attitude. “You know I’ll do it. I won’t have Loki making off with one of my best agents again. I need you where SHIELD can make sure you’re secure at all times.”

Clint opened his mouth to retort, however he was beat to it by someone else.

“With all due respect, Director Fury, and I don’t mean to cause any conflict,” Q, of all people, interrupted, “but if you’re arguing in terms of security, Stark Tower is one of the most secure buildings in the world, if not *the* most secure. In terms of technology, at least.”

Clint shot the young MI6 operative a surprised but appreciative look. Quillan’s argument was a little bit on the passive-aggressive side, but he honestly hadn’t expected Q to stand up for him. Maybe he’d be able to get out of this horrible medical bay after all.

“Sir, if you’re keeping Clint here on grounds of security, then there’s no way you’re going to be able to win this argument,” Aaron said this time, causing Clint to turn to him in pleasant surprise, too. “You may have excellent agents at SHIELD here, but, frankly, they’ve been doing a lousy job of keeping Clint safe. Don’t forget that it was us that found Clint this time, not SHIELD, and that it was in considerably less time than you did last time. If we’d worked as slowly as you guys, Clint’d be dead.”

Harsh but true.

“Also, I know that Clint hasn’t told SHIELD about us,” Will said, taking over from his brother, “but we’re not civilians. And, quite frankly, we’re the best. Like Aaron said, you may have good agents at SHIELD, but we’re better. Currently staying in that tower we’ve got two NYPD detectives, two LAPD SWAT operatives, a genius British detective and a former army doctor working for the Scotland Yard, a current EOD unit member, a former CIA Operation Outcome member and their best geneticist, four IMF agents including the former Head Analyst and IMF’s top agent, two MI6 operatives – one their best double o agent and the other the head of their Quartermaster Branch – and an entire team of superheroes.

“And most importantly? They all would go far above and beyond the call of duty to protect Clint. I won’t leave Clint here in your care in this state until you can look me in the eye and say that, without a doubt, everyone on this goddamn ship would give up their lives for my brother,” Will continued, looking at Fury with sharp eyes. “See, I *know* that you can’t promise me that. And do you know the main reason for that? *Loki*. He forced Clint to do horrible things – to attack fellow agents. You can’t pretend that there aren’t agents on this ship that still resent Clint for that.

“And I get that, I do. I’m sure that they understand, logically, that none of it was Clint’s fault – in *any* way, shape, or form – but when it comes down to the wire, they *will* hesitate and that could cost Clint his life,” he concluded, still staring at Fury.

“No one here will hesitate,” Ethan affirmed, softly but unwaveringly, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder.

Clint felt like he’d been punched in the gut. In a good way, as strange as that sounds. He knew his brothers loved him – How could he not? – and they’d said so aloud before, but to hear it like this... It just blew his mind in the best of ways. It wasn’t just his brothers, either, Clint realized. Throughout Will’s speech no one had looked uncomfortable, just serious. No one had opted out, no one really felt like an outsider. Ethan had even confirmed it aloud. Clint knew that for Ethan it was more to do with his loyalty to Will and that, for many of the people in the room who he’d only just met, they were so quick to protect him because of their connection to one of his brothers, but still... to have so many people defend him in such a way...

It was a little overwhelming.

“Sir, if it helps, they’re more likely to be able to keep me safe in bed than all of SHIELD medical from every facility combined,” Clint said after a moment, his voice a little rough, partly from fatigue and partly from his emotional state.

“Fine,” Fury answered after a long pause. “On two conditions. One, that there is *always* someone with you. And two, that someone is Agent Coulson.”

“What?” Clint said, his voice sounding a little strangled to his own ears. “I mean, he’s on vacation! You can’t make him babysit me.”

“Agent Coulson?” Fury said, turning to the man in question.

“It sounds like a logical course of action,” he answered carefully, his expression unreadable. “I would agree that having someone guard Barton is necessary and I’m the most qualified agent who is available at the moment.”

“There you go, Agent,” Fury stated, turning back to Clint. He didn’t *look* smug, but Clint was sure that he was.

“Why not Nat? She’s perfectly qualified,” Clint retorted, glaring at Fury.

“And on vacation,” Fury replied simply.

“But Coulson’s on vacation too!” Clint protested.

“It may be listed as ‘vacation’ but it was technically forced leave,” Fury answered casually. “And even then, he only really had to take one day off. He got a whole day and a half. So, unless he

wants to,” Fury glanced over at Phil, “then he doesn’t have to endure any more ‘vacation’.”

“Thank god,” Phil said, a faint smile on his face.

“Does that answer satisfy you?” Fury asked, looking at Clint again.

“No,” Clint replied petulantly.

“Well, deal with it,” Fury said. “Or you can stay here.”

“Fine,” Clint muttered.

The next half hour passed in a blur. Clint saw everything through a haze of exhaustion, despite the firm determination he instilled in himself to try and stay as awake as physically possible. That probably would have been a little more effective if it wasn’t for the fact that he really couldn’t do much physically at the moment. He knew, vaguely, that he must have been in a car at some point, and someone must have helped him out of the bed back in the hospital room, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember any of this. Normally after being injured and transported in such a way, Clint would be hyper aware of any and all danger, but due to the combination of Loki’s magic and his brothers’ soothing presence, he just couldn’t muster the brainpower. He was completely vulnerable. He was strangely okay with that.

Clint flopped down on his (very circular, because Tony thought it would be funny to give him a “nest”) bed, escaping John’s overprotective clutches as his older brother let go of his shoulder. Clint appreciated John’s help, of course he did – he’d never have made it down the hallway without his brother’s arm around his shoulders to steady him – but his human contact quota for the day was just about full. He’d never liked people manhandling him. (Which probably had something to do with his bastard of a father and the sort of physical contact *he* preferred. God, Clint’s therapist would have a fucking *field day* if she got him on her couch in this state of mind. He seemed to be willing to admit just about anything right now.)

It was only five pm and Clint had slept for the majority of the day, but he was *so tired*. Even after the worst of missions he’d never felt quite this fatigued. He *hated* magic. Kissing everyone in SHIELD to try and find his “true love” to break the spell almost sounded preferable to this bond deep weariness right now.

Of course, Clint was pretty sure he already knew who his “true love” was. It was a pity there was no way he was their “true love.”

“Barton?”

Speak of the devil. And it looked like John was abandoning him now, too. So it was just him and Phil. In his bedroom. While he was lying sprawled out on his bed. If he wasn’t so tired right now, Clint was sure he’d be overanalyzing this.

“You know, if you’re going to be stalking me for the next week you can call me ‘Clint’,” the archer said, turning his head so that his voice wouldn’t be muffled by the pillows, considering he’d landed face down on the bed.

“Barton, that wouldn’t be – ” Phil started, but Clint cut him off.

“Professional?” he supplied, letting out a huff of laughter. “You’re gonna be watching me piss for the next few days. I think ‘professional’ flew out the window the moment you agreed to babysit me.”

“Fury did say ‘everywhere’, didn’t he?” Phil said, sounding as if he was just realizing the full extent of his duties. He probably was.

“You know, you don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Clint mumbled sleepily.

“Watch you piss?” Phil asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Watch me at all,” Clint explained. “It’s not like Fury’s gonna know.”

“Was that a joke?” Phil questioned, amusement in his voice. “Because I’m pretty sure that Fury’s going to have me submit a mission report, including every detail down to how loudly you snore, Barton.”

Clint shot him a “look.”

“Clint,” he corrected, a little bit of hesitation in his voice.

“And I don’t *snore*,” Clint whined, burying his face back in his pillow.

“Right,” Phil said. “Because you’re going to suffocate yourself with your pillow instead.”

“Fuck you,” Clint tried to say, although it probably just came out as an odd series of cow-like noises, considering his face was still buried in his pillow. (Which may or may not be so he didn’t spend all his time staring at Phil while thinking about how comfortable his bed was.)

“Are you, uh, going to sleep now?” Phil asked a little awkwardly.

“Yes,” Clint replied, this time lifting his head slightly up off the pillow so his voice was audible. Or, rather, decipherable.

“Okay, then. I’ll wake you up for dinner,” Phil said, still standing by the door. He made no move to go anywhere.

“...You could, you know, sit down,” Clint told him after a few moments. “I promise you won’t die if you step more than a foot into my room.”

“Thank you,” Phil replied, and a moment later Clint heard the soft rustling of his clothing as he walked over to sit in the large purple armchair in one corner of Clint’s room.

Clint closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Of course, now that he actually could go to sleep, his mind was far too active. It didn’t matter that he was exhausted, all that his mind could focus on was the fact that *Phil Coulson* was in his bedroom, protecting him. Well, watching him sleep. Which, admittedly was really creepy. Actually, it wasn’t as creepy as it could have been, considering how Phil wasn’t actually watching Clint, he was watching to door. He was just on lookout duty, really. It was like any other op. Just like how, to Phil, Clint was just any other agent. I mean, Phil had watched Cap while he was sleeping, too.

Clint’s heart clenched uncomfortably at that thought. Because they really were different. Defrost Cap had been an op, but one that Phil had practically begged for and he went through the entire

mission with anticipation and excitement. Clint was just another boring op that he was assigned to. He was probably imagining all of the different ways he could be spending his vacation time right now, instead of babysitting Clint Fucking Barton.

Clint turned onto his side, staring at the wall on the opposite side from Phil. He really wished that he'd taken Bruce up on those meditation classes he'd offered Clint right now. Clint was an expert at clearing his mind when he was on an op, but when it came to Phil Coulson, Clint couldn't do it to save his life. When Phil walked into a room he took up all the space inside Clint's head. Clint continued to stare at the wall, wishing for sleep to come.

On the other side of the room, Phil Coulson wondered if accepting this mission had been a huge mistake.

Chapter 7: Barton Family PowerPoint

Chapter Summary

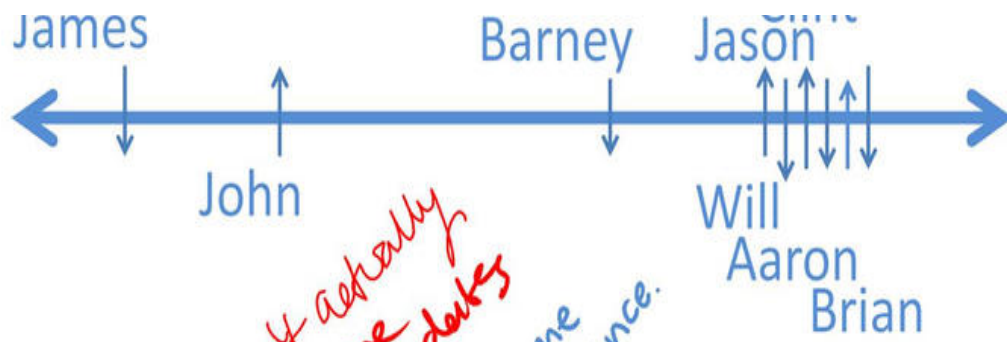
AJM requested that I do the Barton Family PowerPoint. So here it is! (With additional commentary from Clint and Will. Clint writes in red, Will in blue.) I'm sorry about the quality of the images, though. They got a bit messed up when I tried to transfer them here.

THE BARTON FAMILY

*not that any of
us actually have
the same last name*

*We did at
one point.*

William
Clint



*This isn't actually
a timeline
there's no dates*

*It's relative time
shown by distance.*

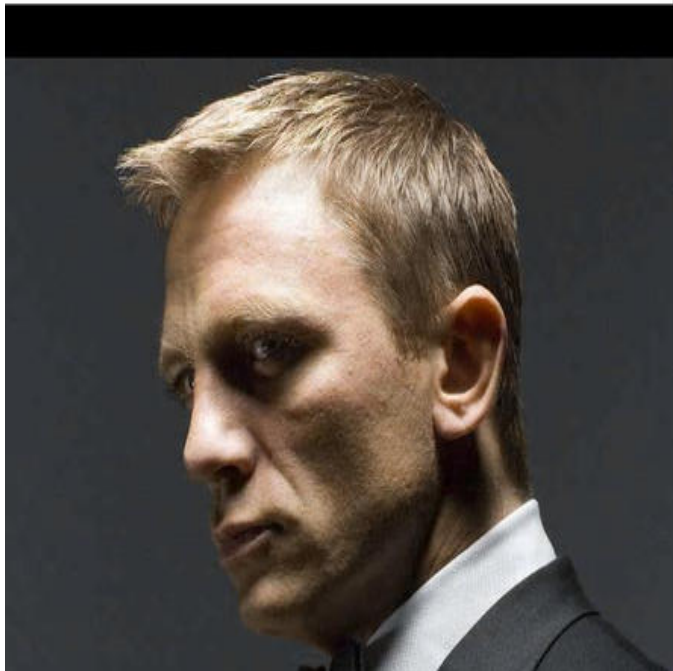


What happened
to the other
pictures that
were there?

I wanted one with
everyone in it. Plus,
you were wearing
sunglasses in the
other one.



James
is the oldest.
He works for
MI:6



John
is the second.
He's an ex-
army doctor
and now helps
the Scotland
Yard.



*John looks
half serious and
half adorable.*

*These are
formal
pictures.
Unlike
yours.*





Will
is the oldest
of the
sextuplets.
He's an
analyst
for the IMF.





Aaron
is an ex-CIA
and Operation
Outcome agent.





Jason
is a detective
for the NYPD's
2nd district.

Brian
is on a SWAT team
for the LAPD.





Clint
is a SHIELD
agent and
superhero.



William
is in an EOD unit
disarming
bombs.

*THIS IS TOTALLY
INACCURATE
DEPICTION OF HOW!!
No it's not.
He's not nearly
this serious.
Point!*



Transcript:

Clint: not that any of us have the same last name

Will: We did at one point.

Clint: this isn't actually a timeline there's no dates

Will: It's relative time shown by distance.

Clint: what happened to the other pictures that were here?

Will: I wanted one with everyone in it. Plus, you were wearing sunglasses in the other one.

Clint: i'm really tempted to draw on these pictures

Will: DON'T.

Clint: he looks half serious and half adorable

Will: These are formal pictures. Unlike yours.

Clint: not anymore :)

Will: There's nothing wrong with being an analyst!

Clint: keep telling yourself that

Clint: and somehow Aaron manages to have the most guns of all of us :D

Will: Why are you happy about that?

Clint: i think you managed to find the worst picture of Jason ever

Will: I think it looks fine.

Clint: why?? do you have a thing for kevlar??

Clint: when were these pictures taken?!?

Will: When Brian went "rogue."

Clint: Yeah, i know but who took them??

Will: No clue.

Will: I like your expression here.

Clint: shut up you were scared of a twenty foot drop!

Clint: THIS IS A TOTALLY INACCURATE DEPICTION OF HIM!!

Will: No it's not.

Clint: he's not nearly this serious :(

Will: Point.

Chapter 8: Two Games

Chapter Summary

More drama, more fluff, and some board games.

Trigger Warnings: allusions to mind control and minor violence. Also the typical self esteem issues.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took me so long to update! Here you go! See trigger warnings in the chapter summary. No major ones, though.

Brian Gamble knew he was a bit of a loose cannon. Everyone else knew it too, and that didn't bother him much, but it *did* bother him when they were all thinking it and none of them had the balls to confront him on it. He *knew* he'd fucked up. He *knew* he shouldn't have stormed off like that and he *knew* that people were pissed at him. Hell, he was probably more pissed at himself than anyone else was. He'd lashed out again without thinking things through logically again and it could have cost him his brother's life. They could have found Clint in half the time if half of them hadn't been looking for *him* too. He'd *really* fucked up.

A part of Brian's mind tried to argue that it wouldn't have mattered whether the others hadn't been wasting their time looking for him or not, as it really all came down to John's friend Sherlock figuring out Loki's twisted mind. Having everyone else there wouldn't have helped him think. Probably. No one could deny that the whole thing would be easier without him temper tantrum, though.

He still wasn't sure about Clint's new friends, though. Yeah, they'd all jumped to help Clint, but what had any of them really *done*? Sherlock had figured out where Clint was being held and James had disarmed the bomb with help from William. Well, he supposed they wouldn't have known what apartment to search without Agent Coulson, but really, Clint clearly wouldn't have been in that situation in the first place if it wasn't for S.H.I.E.L.D. Sherlock had said so himself, the whole point of this game was to get at S.H.I.E.L.D and the Avengers. If Clint was something normal like an IMF agent, then none of this would have happened!

Of course, Clint would still have enemies if he worked for IMF or in law enforcement or something, but they wouldn't be nearly this *dangerous*. Even James mostly dealt with terrorists – not alien overlords. Clint could surely get the same adrenaline rush with less risk. Well, maybe not quite, but Brian was probably biased. He hadn't had a very good experience with S.H.I.E.L.D in the past. You know, considering last time he'd worked with them he'd lost his job, become despised by all of his friends, and nearly killed by Jim. Admittedly, they'd taken it all back once they found out

about the undercover OP, but it still made him feel like shit when it was happening. Not to mention that most of them weren't even given the whole story and were still a little wary of him.

So yes, Brian didn't like SHIELD. He thought that the majority of them were ruthless bastards flying under the flag of justice, but they got away with being assholes because they got the job done. And coming from the LAPD bureaucratic nightmare, he had a grudging respect for people who got things done.

Of course, SHIELD still pissed him off. Which was why he was extremely surprised to find that he kind of liked Agent Philip Coulson. Maybe it was because Clint liked him (and despite what some people might think, there *were* some people whose happiness he placed above his own). Of course, at the same time, "because Clint liked him" should logically be a point *against* Coulson. As wonderful as his baby brother was (and Clint *was* his baby brother – despite the fact that Brian was a whole three minutes younger), Brian was pretty sure Clint's superpower was his ability to attract bastards.

Brian was pretty sure that a psychologist could spit out some bullshit about their childhood and how growing up around utter bastards gave them an affinity for utter bastards, but Brian was also sure that part of it had to do with Clint's shitty luck. Because out of all of them, except for maybe Barney, Clint most certainly had the shittiest luck of the Barton siblings.

So Brian really should hate Agent Philip J. Coulson. But he didn't, which frustrated him to no end. Hell, the guy was a suit, Clint's superior, and a SHIELD agent. That was an absolutely *horrible* combination in Brian's mind.

But, for some reason, the guy didn't act like he should. Brian had long ago determined the recipe for a perfect bastard in law enforcement: power, politics, and ruthlessness. Brian had yet to meet someone who was in a position of power, could work the agency politics, and didn't hesitate in anything who wasn't an asshole. Yet, for some reason, Coulson wasn't tipping off Brian's Bastard Radar. Of course, his sixth sense always seemed to go a bit screwy whenever one of his brothers was involved, but he'd been paying close attention – he should have noticed *something*.

Maybe it was because of the way Coulson had used these traits. Power: to protect Clint. Politics: to convince others to help find Clint. Ruthlessness: to ensure that Clint was saved. It was entirely obvious that he cared about Clint beyond their standard handler/asset relationship. Was it love? Maybe. Romantic? Possibly. Clint was clearly romantically in love with his handler, though. That was what worried Brian, because even if Coulson wasn't a bad person – even if he did care about Clint – there was a very high chance that Coulson would accidentally hurt Clint. It always surprised Brian how easy it was to hurt someone without intending to.

Take his relationship with Jim, for example. They were friends – best friends actually. Did he want more? Fuck if he knew. Did Jim want more? Clearly not. Did that make it super frustrating whenever he felt hurt by something Jim did or a comment that Jim made that really shouldn't hurt as much as it did? Hell yes. It *shouldn't* hurt. It really fucking shouldn't. But for some reason it did.

Brian really didn't know what he felt about Jim Street. There were the normal friend feelings, of course. He cared about Jim and there really wasn't anyone he'd rather spend a Friday night with, kicking back and watching a ball game, but it was more than that. Sometimes it felt like Jim was the only person in the entire world, or at least the only one who mattered. Sometimes he'd find himself out on a casual date with a pretty girl, only to wish that it was Jim who was with him instead, bored by the girl's inane chatter. Sometimes he wanted to have sex with Jim. Of course,

Brian was far more likely to image a curvy redhead in bed with him than tall, muscular Jim Street, but the thought of Jim in his bed wasn't entirely foreign to him.

So what did this mean? He wasn't gay – he couldn't be, not with his prominent attraction to women. Bisexual, then? He hadn't often been attracted to men before, but he could appreciate a good looking guy, in that abstract sort of way. Hetero-and-Jim-sexual? Was that a thing?

But what about the non-sexual aspects? Like, romantically. Sure, they were close, but were they *that* close? The two of them against the world. Brian wasn't sure when exactly that thought had first come into his mind. Before it was always his brothers and him against the world. To a lesser extent, after they'd been adopted, it'd been William and him against the world. But when had it become Jim and him against the world?

"I think you're going to injure something if you keep thinking so hard," a voice said, startling Brian out of his thoughts.

Brian looked over to find Tony Stark standing in the doorway to the room, looking as utterly casual and nonchalant as always, despite the chaos that had swept through their lives only twenty four hours prior. Brian inwardly bristled at how calm he looked – as if what had happened to Clint really meant nothing in the grand scheme of the great Tony Stark's life.

"I thought thinking was what you did twenty four/seven, being a *genius* and all," Brian shot back, glaring. "Didn't you go to college when you were still in diapers or something?"

"Thirteen, actually," Tony replied, his tone entirely casual and completely unchanged. "And of course I think every hour of the day. I just don't injure myself because I'm a genius. See, that the benefit of being a genius – you don't actually have to think hard about anything. Unless, of course, it's something no one else has ever thought of before, and, even then, I only really have to think a little harder than normal."

Brian was pretty sure that if he'd met Tony Stark in any other context, he'd love the guy. As it was, he seemed like just another verification of the fact that Clint collected bastards. Brian was honestly starting to wonder if it was a hobby of his. Clint's best friend was a Russian ice queen with a ruthless streak larger than the country she came from. Who *has* friends like that?

(Brian resolutely ignored the little voice in his head that reminded him that most people thought *he* was an asshole.)

"Look, did you come here to actually say something or just inflate your own ego?" Brian snapped, frowning at Tony.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting something important?" Tony said mockingly. "Because we kind of thought that you were hiding up here moping in the dark."

"Just tanning here in the sunlight," Brian shot back, voice saturated in snark. "You can tell my nosy brothers that I promise not to get skin cancer."

"I don't mean to interrupt your 'wallow in sorrow' session – well, yes I do, but this building has already reached its capacity for reclusive behavior, you know, considering we have two assassins, a guy who turns into a giant green rage monster when mad, and a man who's been under ice for the past fifty years," Tony answered, still standing in the doorway.

“You forgot to mention the scientist who spends days at a time holed up in his lab, working nonstop,” another voice deadpanned, Natasha appearing next to Tony in the doorway, casually leaning against the frame.

“You know, I don’t think mentioning recluses is supposed to summon them,” Tony said, turning to face the SHIELD agent. “The opposite, actually.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

“Look, can you guys just get out of my room?” Brian interrupted. “Tell my brothers to come talk to me themselves if they’re so concerned.”

The last part of what Brian said was a little bitterer than he’d intended it to be. He shivered a bit as it reminded him of his short time working for SHIELD, when he couldn’t help the resentment that welled up within himself as his friends and coworkers all turned on him, despite knowing that he’d betrayed them first. If he went to talk to his brothers right now, he was sure he’d say something he’d regret later.

“I’m not sure about Superspy here, but I’m working freelance,” Tony replied, giving Brian an unimpressed look. “I actually am here to discuss your brother’s pathetic love life.”

“And I’m here to tell him that he’s only going to make a bigger mess of things if he interferes,” Natasha continued, frowning at Tony.

“Why the fuck are you enlisting *me* to help sort out Clint’s lack of relationships?” Brian asked, incredulous. Did it *look* like he had a happy marriage? Or even a girlfriend?

“Because Robin Hood and Agent have been making doe eyes at each other for *months* and it’s starting to get on my nerves,” Tony said, completely missing Brian’s point.

“Do you really have no sense of preservation?” Natasha asked, voice low and dangerous. “Because I *will* castrate you if you mess up their relationship.”

“They have no relationship to mess up! That’s my point!” Tony shot back.

“They’re friends,” Natasha growled.

“They both clearly want to be more than friends,” Tony said.

“They’ll figure it out on their own,” Natasha replied, sharp eyes boring into Tony, her gaze unnerving and steely.

“You’ve been trying that method for six years and nothing has happened,” Tony pointed out, both of them pretty much ignoring Brian now.

“Hey,” Brian interrupted, drawing their attention back to him. “Yes, I can see that they’ve both fallen in one-sided love, but they seem to be doing fine.”

“Doing fine?” Tony said, incredulous. “They’re both slowly dying of lovesickness. It’s painful just to watch. I don’t know what channel you’re watching, but it’s clearly not the ‘I’m going to commit suicide soon because the object of my affections will never return my undying love’ one.”

“Look, Clint’s dated a lot of bastards,” Brian replied, growing more frustrated with Tony. “And I’m personally for not letting Clint get himself stuck with yet another one.”

“Hey, Agent’s a good guy,” Tony protested. “Sure, he has a huge stick up his ass, but I’m sure Clint wouldn’t mind helping him, ah, *loosen up*.”

Natasha looked like she was resisting the urge to roll her eyes at Tony’s crass innuendo, clearly exasperated by the extra eyebrow wiggle that accompanied Tony’s statement.

“I’m afraid that I have to agree with Stark on this one,” she admitted grudgingly, folding her arms over her chest, her hip still resting against the doorframe. “Coulson is a nice person. He treats Clint well. I just believe they should figure things out themselves to avoid any... mishaps.”

“The people who don’t mean to hurt you can sometimes be the people who hurt you the most,” Brian replied, lips pressed in a thin line. “And people who are nice to their friends can be utter assholes to their partners, sometimes.”

“And here I thought Miss Russian Assassin was cold with her whole ‘love is for children’ spiel,” Tony said, giving Brian an odd look, perhaps a little disappointed.

“Don’t try whatever matchmaking scheme you’ve come up with,” Brian said with a bit of a warning in his tone.

Tony’s facial expression told him quite clearly that there was no way he was going to listen to Brian.

“Clint will change their relationship when he’s ready. He’s fine now,” Brian finished, his tone firm. “Now leave me alone for a bit, would you?”

Clint Barton was *not* fine. He really really was not fine with this situation *at all*. It wasn’t that difficult to keep his feelings for Phil in neatly sealed boxes when they mainly only interacted at work, but spending every moment with Phil was...difficult. Every few minutes he was nearly overwhelmed with how much he wanted something *more* with this man, which was a completely selfish feeling to have and made him feel intensely guilty after the wave of emotion passed. He knew he’d never been good at being reasonable, but having these feelings wasn’t fair to Phil. God, if he knew...

Clint glanced over into the living room from where he stood at the bathroom sink, eyes landing on Phil, who was sitting in the large armchair in the opposite corner of the room, reading a mission report. Clint had already been brushing his teeth for the past seven minutes. He’d have to come out from his tiny bathroom sanctuary soon, but he’d try to stall for as long as possible.

“Agent Barton?” an automated voice sounded from somewhere above Clint, causing him to flinch slightly in surprise, before realizing that it was just JARVIS. “There’s a man in the front lobby who says he wishes to speak with you.”

“Me?” Clint asked after spitting out his toothpaste into the sink. “Who is it? Everyone knows I’m on vacation.”

“Dr. Adrian Swenson. He says he wishes to speak to you about a personal matter,” the AI replied.

“From SHIELD R&D?” Clint said, surprised. He had absolutely no clue what Dr. Swenson would need to talk to him about, especially if it was personal. They’d never interacted outside of work...

“According to SHIELD databases, yes,” JARVIS answered. “Is he someone you do not wish to speak with?”

“No, it’s fine,” Clint replied, moving to quickly rinse out his mouth, the strong mint flavor of his toothpaste branded onto his tongue. “Send him up the common living room and tell him I’ll be down in just a sec.”

“I will, Agent Barton,” the AI said before going quiet again.

Clint put his toothbrush and toothpaste back into the medicine cabinet, the movement of his hand stuttering for a moment as he saw Phil’s spare toothbrush already sitting inside the cabinet. He swallowed thickly and shut the cabinet quickly, resolutely trying to ignore the warm feeling inside his chest as he strode briskly back into the hallway, walking over to the living room. Phil was no longer reading mission reports but was instead looking at Clint with an unreadable expression. Clint grabbed the keys to his mini Stark Tower apartment off the coffee table before turning to Phil.

“Are we going out?” the other agent asked.

“No, I’m just going down to the common living room to talk with Dr. Swenson,” Clint replied, trying to ignore the fact that Phil had said “we” instead of “you.”

“Were you expecting him?” Phil asked, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

“Well, not really,” Clint admitted, fiddling with the keys in his hands, trying to tamp down on the warm, happy feeling he got when Phil was concerned about him. “I’m not sure what he wants to talk about. Apparently it’s something personal.”

“Okay, then,” Phil said, stacking his papers neatly on the coffee table and standing up, taking a moment to stretch.

“You’re coming with me?” Clint asked, unable to keep at least some of the surprise out of his voice. “I’ll still be in the building, you know, and everyone else is still around, too.”

“I was given strict orders to not let you out of my sight,” Phil replied, pulling on his suit jacket. “I’m not about to mess up this assignment less than twenty four hours in.”

“Suit yourself,” Clint shrugged, although internally he was still feeling rather self conscious.

He pulled open the door, holding it open for Phil before shutting it behind himself and locking it. They walked down the short hallway to the elevator, waiting in front of it for a few minutes before they heard the soft ding that signaled the elevator’s arrival. Clint tucked himself in the corner opposite from Phil, crossing his arms over his chest and watching the numbers go lower on the digital meter that recorded what floor they were on. The elevator ride passed in silence.

When they came to a stop, Clint pushed himself off of the wall he was leaning against, feeling a wave of dizziness wash over him. He was brought back down to earth by Phil’s warm hand on the small of his back, steadying him. Clint shot Phil a halfhearted dirty look, hoping that Phil interpreted it as Clint being embarrassed about needing help. Which he was, that just wasn’t the reason for the dirty look. Clint just hoped that it would cause Phil to stop touching him all the time,

because if he kept this up Clint would eventually end up doing something he'd regret. That they'd both regret.

Clint tried to banish those thoughts of Phil from his mind as he caught sight of Dr. Adrian Swenson hovering near the main elevators on the side of the living room, every bit the awkward scientist stereotype. Except for where he completely *wasn't*. The scientist may have been a little on the shy side and could drone on about all sorts of geeky stuff for hours, but despite the joke Clint had made about Swenson giving him odd looks the other day, he couldn't deny that Swenson was pretty attractive – tall with light blond hair and dark blue eyes.

Of course, Clint had always been partial to short dark hair and pale blue eyes.

"Ah, Agent Barton – Clint," Swenson greeted, smiling at him warmly. "You don't mind me calling you Clint do you?"

"Um, sure," Clint replied feeling a little uncomfortable, but not wanting to be rude.

"Good," Swenson said, beaming again. "Call me Adrian, then."

"Okay," Clint said, unsure where exactly this conversation was going. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he felt Phil's presence only a few feet away, far enough to be respectful, but not so close that he couldn't overhear what they were saying and be by Clint's side in less than a second if something went wrong. Not that he thought that anything would go wrong in just a simple conversation with a friendly coworker, but you never know.

"How are you feeling?" Swenson – no, *Adrian* – asked, concern in his expression as his eyes scanned Clint's body, checking for injuries.

"Fine," Clint replied, a little taken off guard. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, I wanted to talk to you yesterday but when I came over here I was told you were in the hospital," Adrian explained, toying with the box in his hands that Clint had somehow not noticed until now. "They wouldn't tell me what happened – apparently I don't have high enough clearance – but it must have been pretty rough to land you in the hospital."

"It really wasn't much," Clint said quickly, feeling his cheeks heat in embarrassment. "I was just a bit...exhausted, I guess. I'm still a little tired, but isn't everyone?"

Clint forced a disarming, lopsided smile onto his face. He was still a little nervous – he wasn't sure how to react to someone other than his family or very close friends showing concern about him – but besides the wandering gaze, Adrian seemed like a nice enough guy. Clint snuck a quick glance over at Phil to make sure he wasn't dying of boredom or something, but the other agent seemed to be engrossed in whatever he was doing on his phone, completely indifferent to Clint. Which was kind of what Clint had expected. He just needed a little something to remind himself that Phil was only hanging around because of his mission, not because of Clint.

"So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" Clint asked, looking back over at Adrian, barely catching a glimpse of something akin to annoyance or jealousy in the scientist's eyes.

"Well, first I wanted to give you this," he replied, handing over the small box in his hands. "It's just a little get well present. Some chocolate."

“Sweet. Thanks,” Clint said, opening up the box and peering at fancy truffles. Now he was *definitely* confused. No one except for Tony Stark had *ever* given him fancy chocolates, and Tony had only given him some because he was handing them out to all of the Avengers. (Of course, Clint suspected that he really just wanted to give some to Steve but was too scared to single him out.)

“Try one of these,” Adrian said, pointing to a circular one in the left corner of the box. “Dark chocolate and caramel – it’s really good.”

Clint popped it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully, the chocolate and caramel sliding over his tongue, both creamy and liquid at the same time, melting quickly in his mouth. There was also some little hint of a taste underneath, on the edge of his senses, delectable and addicting...

“There’s also one more thing I wanted to talk to you about,” Adrian continued, breaking Clint out of his thoughts. “Would you maybe like to go out to dinner with me sometime?”

Clint nearly choked on his chocolate. He had *not* seen this coming, even though he really probably should have. Adrian had been spending far more time than necessary going over arrow designs with him and would often try to coax him into personal conversations. Clint, more often than not, found the scientist staring at him from across the room, although Adrian always looked away in embarrassment as soon as Clint looked back at him. However, he hadn’t recognized it as the same look that marks in the field often gave him when he had to flirt with them to get them away from a crowd.

“I wasn’t trying to bribe you with the chocolate or anything, and if you want me to I won’t bother you anymore, but I really would like to take you out on a date,” Adrian said, filling in Clint’s silence.

Clint glanced over at Phil again. Phil, as before, looked utterly bored and nonchalant. Clint felt a little disappointed at that, but really, it was what he expected. Phil may be foremost in Clint’s heart, but that sentiment was clearly not returned. Maybe going out with Adrian would take his mind off of his infatuation with his handler. Well, probably not, but it was worth a shot.

“Sure,” Clint replied, grinning again. “I’m still under medical observation, though, so maybe next week or something. Maybe even longer, depending on how things go.”

“Of course,” Adrian answered. “Why don’t I call you in a few days and we can see how you’re feeling?”

“Sounds good,” Clint said, smiling slightly again.

“Here, I’ll write down my phone number...” Adrian trailed off, searching in his pockets and coming up with a sharpie but no paper. “Er, I appear to have forgotten my pad of paper back at the lab. Do you mind if I just write it on your hand or something?”

“Sure,” Clint replied, holding out his hand to the other man, shivering slightly as Adrian’s chilly fingers wrapped around his wrist, holding his hand steady as he began writing on the back of Clint’s right hand. The soft felt tip of the marker traced out the numbers in a tight, neat script on Clint’s skin.

Clint heard the elevator doors open on one of the far elevators and looked up to see Thor, Aaron and Marta walk in, chatting about something or other. Thor looked over at Clint and grinned, going over to greet him, however as he walked closer the smile on his face rapidly decreased. He glanced

over at Adrian and seemed to freeze for a moment before suddenly sprinting over to tackle the scientist, the ink of the marker smearing over the lines where Adrian had started writing his name over his phone number.

“What the fuck, Thor?!” Clint yelled, trying to shove the huge blonde man off of the startled scientist, however Thor just grabbed his hammer and placed it squarely on Adrian’s chest. Damn. There was no way Clint was going to get *that* off.

“Damn. Fuck. Here just – hold on for a second. I’ll go talk – ” Clint started, giving Adrian an apologetic look, only to be cut off by the scientist.

“No. It won’t do any good. I guess the game’s up,” Adrian said, suddenly looking much sharper and slipperier. “I do appreciate your concern, though.”

Adrian shot a lopsided smirk at Clint, giving the confused archer a suggestive onceover.

“You know, I really wouldn’t have minded taking you out on a date,” Adrian said, eyes locked onto Clint’s eyes. “At least, I wouldn’t have minded what comes after...”

“What have you done to my friend, Adiaerf?” Thor demanded, looming over Adrian. “If you have harmed him...”

“Relax son of Odin,” Adrian spat back, angry but not trying to fight against the weight of the hammer on his chest. “You were fast enough to save the archer’s virtue. You also did a fairly messy, but effective, job of messing up my spell.”

“Spell?” Aaron’s sharp voice echoed from beside Clint, who he was now standing next to.

“Names contain much power,” Thor explained, eyes never leaving the other man on the floor. “Should he have finished writing his name on you, Hawk, then he would have had some measure of power over your soul. Not complete control – that requires a potion – but partial – ”

“Wait, did you say a potion?” Phil broke in, beside Clint and Thor in a moment. He took the box of chocolates, that Clint was still holding in a death grip, out of his hands, examining the truffles. “Would these work?”

Clint could actually see Thor bristle in rage as his eyes landed on the box of chocolates, whipping around to confront Adrian again, who was still lying on the floor, looking uninterested.

“What devious plan did you have? Why do you wish to control Clint? Are you in alliance with Loki?” Thor demanded, hands closed in fists.

“Working *with* Loki? I’m working *against* him,” Adrian spat, distaste for the man in question clear in his voice. “He has no sense of subtlety.”

“What is it you are after?” Thor asked, voice softer as he tried to control himself.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter if you know now, does it?” Adrian sighed. “In a little less than a month is this planet’s winter solstice. It is said that if you are able to obtain the eyes of one with the vision of a bird – *freely given* – then you shall be able to see a back entryway to the bifröst bridge on the solstice. I had been carefully cultivating my plan to obtain the eyes for *months*, but then your

rash little brother storms in and tries some dramatic convoluted plan to get the Hawk for himself. I was *so close*...”

“We’re going to have to take you back to SHIELD headquarters, Dr. Swenson,” Clint heard Phil say, although he only registered it in a sort of detached way, as if he were underwater. Of course the only person who’d asked him out on a date in *years* was a psycho who wanted to gouge out his eyes and use them for some magic ceremony. Story of his life. For some reason only bastards were attracted to him.

“Thor and I will take Swenson back,” a voice broke into his thoughts – Natasha. “Sir, you should stay with Clint. It’s still your mission to keep an eye on him.”

“And look at the mess I’m making of it,” Clint heard Phil mutter under his breath.

“What mess have you gotten yourself into now?” Clint heard another voice ask, causing him to look over to see Jason, the rest of the tower’s current residents gathering in the room, quickly taking in the scene. “I know that you have shitty luck but this is getting kind of ridiculous.”

“Apparently my eyes are the main ingredient to some Asgardian ritual,” Clint said dryly, doing his best to brush off the situation. “That’s the actual reason Loki came after me yesterday.”

“And there might be more coming after you,” Phil broke in, moving to stand closer to Clint. “You’re not leaving this tower until we’re sure you’re safe.”

“You can’t do that, Sir,” Clint demanded, glaring at his handler, lips pressed in a hard line.

“Because going by that logic, I won’t be safe until the winter solstice and that’s still a month away. I can’t be cooped up in here for a month! I have a job to do, you know.”

“You can and you will, Specialist,” Phil asserted in his ‘Superior SHIELD Agent’ voice. “You were able to live in a compound in Siberia for a month after the blizzard hit, so you should have no problem toughing it out in the tower.”

“That was different,” Clint protested.

“That’s an *order*, Barton,” Phil said, voice cold and steady. “And you’re right, it is different. This time you’re being directly targeted by people who want to gouge your eyes out.”

Clint glared at him. As much as he loved the man, there was no way he was going to stay cooped up in the tower for nearly a full month. At least he was pretty sure that Natasha and Tony would help him break out.

“It’s not like this is the first time dangerous people have been after me,” Clint retorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “In fact, I have a whole list of people who’d be over the moon if they got their hands on me, yet that hasn’t stopped you from letting me back out into the field.”

“Well, none of them have gotten this close,” Phil pointed out. “This is the second time in the past three days that they’ve nearly succeeded in their goals. As the agent in charge of keeping you safe, I’m not going to let them nearly succeed again.”

Clint bristled at his handler’s words, but he didn’t argue any further. He knew that it was impossible to change Phil’s mind when he was so set on something, the way he was now. He settled on just glaring at the other agent again before turning on his heel and stalking unhappily over to the

communal kitchen. He bristled slightly as he felt Phil follow after him, but he tried to tamp down on his anger, reminding himself that Phil was just doing his job.

Clint jumped slightly as he felt a hand land on his arm, looking over to see John next to him. He relaxed immediately, leaning into his brother's presence, letting the anger and frustrated bleed out of him. John would probably just give him another lecture on how this was all for his own good, but at least he was used to listening to the "it's just because we care about you" talks from his brother, considering John had actually been his legal guardian for a few years after the circus. It made sense coming from his family. It did *not* make sense coming from Phil.

Sure, they might be kind of friends, but really, the majority of their interactions were through work. With Phil trying to protect him in such a way right now, Clint was finding it easier and easier to slip into the thought of "Phil actually cares about me, personally" as opposed to "Phil's a good agent, he wouldn't leave anyone behind." The first was a very dangerous thought to have.

"Are you alright?" John asked in a low voice, probably at a level that Phil couldn't overhear without coming closer.

Clint nodded, moving over to the cupboard and grabbing a box of cheerios out, moving about and preparing his standard breakfast as if it was a normal morning. John walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed the box of strawberries out, washing off a few and standing beside Clint, cutting the strawberries as Clint poured out the cereal, placing the fruit on top of the cereal. Clint smiled halfheartedly at John in thanks.

"Look, Clint, I know you're frustrated with the way things are going right now, but just sit tight for a while now," John said, still soft enough so that only Clint could hear. "We're all just concerned about your safety. Let us worry for a while, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, Mom," Clint muttered, dark mood still present, but not as intense as it had been previously.

John didn't press the issue. They walked over to the large kitchen table where many of the others were already seated, munching on various breakfast foods, a solemn mood hanging over them. A few people were trying to lighten the mood with some light conversation (mainly Steve and Benji) but they weren't having much success. Clint sat down next to Will, John taking the other seat on his left. Clint was about to start eating his cereal in silence when suddenly Tony burst into the room.

"Will you guys quit with the whole Eeyore thing you've got going? You know, the whole depressed, storm cloud vibe?" Tony said, dropping a pile of long rectangular boxes down on the table. "You're worse than Cap when he found out that all of his friends were dead."

Steve glared at Tony.

"What's with all the board games?" Will asked, holding up a box labeled 'Cluedo' and examining it, as if trying to find something that would signify that it was actually some fancy gadget and not just a children's board game.

"I hear that some people actually play games when they're bored," Tony replied sarcastically, digging through the pile of boxes until he found the one he was looking for, pulling out a box marked 'Scrabble.'

"We are *not* playing that game again," Steve said firmly, shooting Tony a 'look.'

“Why not?” Tony asked, feigning innocence.

“Last time we played, I had to look up every single one of your words in Wikipedia,” Steve replied, looking disgruntled. “And I still don’t think that you should be allowed to use words like ‘trichlorofluoromethane.’”

“It’s a legitimate word,” Tony protested, ignoring Steve and already unpacking the game on the kitchen table. “But if you’re going to be a stick in the mud, then I’ll agree not to use any technical terms.”

“How about we make a rule that at least three other people need to be able to define the word,” Casey suggested after swallowing her mouthful of corn flakes.

“Works for me,” Tony shrugged, looking over at Bruce, Sherlock, and Marta. They probably all knew their chemistry well enough. This would be a piece of cake. Well, Sherlock might be a bit of a challenge, but nothing he couldn’t handle.

Clint just had a sinking feeling about all of this. Well, at least it promised to be amusing to watch. Maybe it’d even help him forget about his predicament for a little while. Sure, spelling wasn’t his forte, but he had a feeling that people would be paying more attention to whatever crazy words Tony would concoct.

“You know, I think only four people can play scrabble at a time,” Jane pointed out. “And we have twenty people here, even with Natasha and Thor gone right now.”

Tony held up his hand in the universal motion for ‘stop’ before he sprinted out of the room. Everyone looked at each other, slightly wary of whatever it was Tony was doing. The man in question returned a few minutes later, trying to balance four extra scrabble games in his arms.

“Could someone move the table?” he asked. “I think we’re going to need to set this up on the floor.”

“I don’t think I’m going to play – ” James started, only to be assaulted by seven pairs of (surprisingly effective) puppy dog eyes.

“Come on,” William said, pulling James up out of his chair. “Are you saying you’re getting too old to sit on the floor for a few hours?”

“No, I was just thinking that I’d actually give you a chance at winning,” James replied, giving William an unimpressed look.

“Oooh, you’re going to have to back that up now,” Brian laughed, carrying a couple of chairs out of the kitchen and into the living room to clear up some floor space.

James let out an exasperated huff, but sat down on the floor, shooting Q a questioning look, who replied with a frown and shook his head. James raised an eyebrow at the other MI-6 operative, whose frown only deepened.

“Are you refusing to play, Quillan?” Sherlock asked, turning to look at his brother from where he was seated next to John. “Have you ever played another game of Scrabble since I beat you when you were twelve.”

“Of course I’ve played,” Q snapped, bristling at his brother’s taunts. “And I’ve won.”

“You’re refusing a rematch, then?” Sherlock asked.

“No,” Quillan replied, walking over and sitting down between Sherlock and James.

James smiled.

Soon everyone was sitting around the five scrabble boards in an awkward oval shape. It probably would have been easier with four Scrabble boards, but they had twenty people, and whenever someone tried to duck out, they were brought back by the group’s cajoling. It should have been awkward and uncomfortable, and Clint should have hated it, being surrounded by so many people in a relatively confined space, but he was surprised to find himself having fun. He was pretty bad at scrabble, but he’d kind of already known that. So far his longest word was ‘duckling.’ It had even earned him more points than John’s ‘asystole.’

Of course, Tony, Sherlock, Q and, surprisingly, Will were battling for the top score. Well, it actually shouldn’t be quite so surprising that Will was near the top – he did have a photographic memory, after all. He was bound to know a lot of words. They’d already vetoed a few words, though, such as Sherlock’s ‘nihilarian’ which he claimed meant ‘one who does useless work.’ They hadn’t been able to find that one in the dictionary, and Clint was half convinced that Sherlock had made it up himself. It seemed like the sort of word he’d come up with. Of course, apparently Will’s ‘erinaceous’ *was* actually a word meaning ‘of, pertaining to, or resembling a hedgehog.’ They’d still vetoed it, considering no one else had known it. Honestly, what was the point of a word like that?

It was fun, though – Clint couldn’t deny that, and it had effectively distracted him from Loki and Adrian and all of the other stressful things in his life. He glanced over at Phil again quickly, feeling a little guilty about his reactions earlier. It wasn’t Phil’s fault that he was danger prone. Sure, Phil had already known about that when he’d agreed to watch Clint, but this whole situation was probably just as stressful to him. And it was actually logical for Phil to be worried about him. They were friends, and friends worried about friends. He shouldn’t have accused Phil of only wanting to protect Clint because it was his job, even if he’d only thought it and hadn’t actually said it aloud. Just because Phil wasn’t romantically in love with him didn’t mean he couldn’t still like him as a friend.

“And that’s the last of the letters,” Marta announced, placing an ‘i’ in front of the ‘s’ in ‘instant’ to make ‘is.’

“Tally up the scores, Bruce,” Tony crowed, a lopsided grin on his face. “Of course, we already know that I won, but...”

Bruce rolled his eyes, quickly calculating the final scores. He’d been chosen as the scorekeeper, as Tony had declared him to be a ‘neutral party.’ Not that any of them would actually try to cheat at a game of Scrabble, but still.

“Well, William has the lowest score at 132,” Bruce paid no mind to the person in question as he flipped him the bird. “Next is Ethan with 182,” Ethan was intent on inspecting his nails as Bruce said this, “and above him is Brian with 221 and Jim with 223.”

“You beat me by two points?” Brian said, pouting at Jim. “What the fuck, dude?”

Jim just smirked at him and shrugged.

“You know, that’s not entirely horrible,” Benji said, trying to console them. “You’re all probably in the intermediate range. Intermediate players typically average 150-250 points.”

“How do you *know* this?” Brian asked, incredulous. “Are you a professional Scrabble player or something?”

“You know, you’d be amazed at how boring MIT gets,” Benji replied, shrugging. “A guy in my Electrical Engineering and Computer Science class freshman year was a member of the Scrabble club and sometimes he’d bring in a Scrabble board with him and we’d play in the back of the room. Our professor was blind as a bat and never noticed.”

“Next are Clint and Steve, both with 237,” Bruce continued once the others had quieted down. “After them we have Aaron with 241 – ”

“Wait, how’d Clint beat us?” William asked, looking over at Brian and then to Clint. “Dude, you grew up in the circus!”

““Duckling’?” Clint suggested, motioning to the word on the board.

“*Next* we have Jane with 268 and Jason with 274,” Bruce went on, ignoring the others’ interruptions. “Then there’s John with 300 even and James with 305. After them is Marta with 311.”

“You’re getting soft, James,” John said, grinning. “I nearly beat you this time.”

“I wouldn’t want you to think *too* poorly of yourself,” James replied, a hint of a smile on his lips. “This is also the highest you’ve ever scored in Scrabble. Normally you aren’t very good a word games.”

“I think that’s probably Sherlock’s doing,” John admitted, shooting a smile at the consulting detective. “He always gets bored halfway through crossword puzzles and leaves them lying about the flat. I try and finish them sometimes, but I’m still not very good. Plus, just listening to him talk gives you a much wider vocabulary.”

“After them are Phil and Benji, both with 338 and I’m directly after with 339 points,” Bruce said a little louder, looking over at John and James with a tight smile on his face. “Then there’s Casey with 342 points.”

“Where’d you learn to play Scrabble?” Benji asked Casey, curious. “342 is nearly an expert level score.”

“I’ve only played it once in college,” Casey replied, “but I’ve read a lot of books. My parents wanted me to become a lawyer, too.”

“– and then we have first, second and third place,” Bruce continued, not even bothering to stop to wait for the conversations any more. “Quillan is third with 463 points. Tony is second with 471 points. Lastly, Sherlock and Will are tied for first with 509 points.”

“Good game,” Will said, smiling at Sherlock. “Maybe we could play again some other time.”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock replied, giving Will a calculating onceover.

“I will actively encourage anything that keeps Sherlock occupied for a few hours,” John announced. “Feel free to stop by any time you’re in the area.”

“I do that anyway,” Will reminded him. “But I’m sure we can try and set something up online, too.”

“Maybe you’ll want to join too, Quillan,” Sherlock said, looking over at his little brother. “You have some catching up to do, after all.”

“Unlike *you* not all of us have the time to spend hours playing children’s games,” Q shot back. “I actually have a job.”

“What, getting hacked?” Sherlock replied casually.

“Okay, settle down you two,” John sighed, trying to reign in the two brothers. “I don’t want to have to sit through another pointless argument.”

“You know, I’m actually rather partial to pointless arguments,” Tony broke in.

“You would be,” Steve snorted.

“Well, considering you’re more often than not the other party involved in the majority of my own pointless arguments, I really don’t think you can really speak, Captain Stick in the Mud,” Tony shot back, clearly trying to needle Steve.

Clint was about to laugh at their antics, however instead he was interrupted by a large yawn. He suddenly felt extremely tired, like he could fall asleep right there on the kitchen floor. It was only about one thirty in the afternoon, but it looked like the exertion of battling against Loki’s spell was starting to catch up to him again. Clint found it very frustrating that he felt so tired when it really didn’t feel like he’d done much at all that day. He was so used to skipping sleep to do more things in the day that it bothered him to no end that he suddenly had to spend the majority of his day sleeping.

“Are you feeling okay, Clint?” Phil asked, looking over at him with concern, causing Clint’s face to heat in embarrassment.

“Yeah – I’m fine,” Clint replied, waving him off.

“Are you sure?” John asked, taking a closer look at him. “You look pretty tired.”

“Just a little bit,” Clint admitted, “but I’ve slept so much already in the past few days that I’m going to really fuck up my sleep schedule if I keep this up.”

“Clint, your sleep schedule is the last thing we’re worried about right now,” Aaron juttled in, and Clint noticed that everyone was looking at him now, making his face heat again.

“Fine, I’ll go lie down on the couch or something for a little while, okay?” Clint conceded. “Just for a bit.”

“No,” John said, shaking his head. “If you’re going to lie down you should go up to your room. The bed will be easier on your body and it’ll help you sleep better.”

“Come on, John,” Clint complained, frowning at his older brother. “You of all people should know that I can sleep fine anywhere.”

“Yes, I’ve seen you sleep on a cold marble floor before, but that doesn’t mean it’s good for your body,” John retorted. “You’re going to wreck your back if you keep this up. Just go sleep in your bed. Or at least *a* bed.”

“Anyone’s bed?” Clint asked, smirking at John’s statement and trying to twist it into an innuendo.

“*Sleep*, Clint,” John sighed.

“Fine. I can tell when I’m not wanted,” Clint said melodramatically, standing up and stretching out the kinks in his back.

“We wish we had that problem,” William said sarcastically, earning him a punch in the shoulder from Will who was sitting next to him.

“Ow!” William exclaimed, glaring at his brother. “I’m being oppressed over here! Isn’t the constitution supposed to protect me from this sort of shit?”

“What? Freedom of speech? That’s the first amendment,” Jane supplied.

“What she said,” William parroted.

“Okay you guys,” Clint said, rolling his eyes. “I’m going to escape before this escalates. See you in a bit.”

Clint started walking out of the kitchen and into the living room, over to the elevators that lined one wall. He pressed the up button and waited patiently, his skin prickling a little bit as he felt Phil walk over to stand beside him. He shoved his hands into his pockets, trying to appear nonchalant and not focused on how close together they were standing. Clint opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by Phil.

“Don’t try to convince me that I don’t need to come with you, because I think this morning proved that I clearly do,” Phil said quickly and firmly, staring ahead at the elevator doors and not at Clint.

“I was actually going to ask you where you learned to play Scrabble so well, but if you’d rather talk about that...” Clint trailed off, his voice slightly teasing.

“Oh,” Phil said, looking at Clint. “Sorry – I...”

“No, I get it,” Clint replied, waving off Phil’s apology. “I’ve been pretty combative so far, which really isn’t very fair to you. You’re my friend. It makes sense that you’d be worried. I just get kind of frustrated with all the hovering, you know?”

“I get it,” Phil nodded, a slight smile on his mouth. “I’ll try to keep the hovering to a minimum.”

“Good,” Clint said with a note of finality.

Just then, the elevator dinged and the doors opened. The two SHIELD agents walked inside and Clint pushed the button for his floor. The elevator ride was silent again, just like the one earlier that morning, but the silence was a little more comfortable than before. They stepped back off the elevator as the doors opened to Clint’s floor and Clint took only a few more moments to fish his apartment key out of his pocket and open the door. Once they got inside, Clint dropped the keys onto the coffee table again and headed over to the bedroom, collapsing on the large circular bed. He lay there for a few moments before groaning and rolling over, sitting up again to pull off his shoes.

Phil let out a small huff of laughter at Clint's antics and walked over to settle himself down in the large armchair in the corner of the room again.

Clint glanced over at Phil quickly before pulling up the covers of his bed, burrowing back down under the blankets. He lay like that with his eyes closed for a few minutes, tired but not yet asleep. He heard Phil shuffling around in the room. A few minutes later, he had nearly fallen asleep when he felt chapped lips press a light kiss to his forehead.

Clint suddenly felt a lot less tired.

Chapter 9: Three and a Half Days

Chapter Summary

This is it! The final chapter! Time to say goodbye!

Trigger Warnings: Minor violence. I don't think there's anything else...

Chapter Notes

Well, here it is! Here's the end of the line! I hope you guys enjoy the final chapter of 2, 4, 6, & 8!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Philip J. Coulson froze. He was in deep shit. He'd known how much trouble he was in the moment he felt Clint twitch as the other agent felt Phil's lips on his forehead. A moment later his eyes had snapped open and Phil found himself staring into a pair of bright blue – highly confused – eyes. *Gorgeous* eyes.

Shit. What was he supposed to say? Sorry for being such a creeper – I just had this overwhelming urge to kiss you, but I knew you wouldn't like that so I waited until you were asleep? Clint seemed to still be confused, but the moment that he fully realized what happened, Phil was sure he'd panic. Which, all things considering, was a perfectly reasonable reaction to finding out that your handler had a secret obsession with you. Fuck, he'd be lucky if Clint just requested a change in handlers. He could certainly file a sexual harassment suit. Phil really hoped that Clint didn't start punching him right now.

He couldn't believe that he'd just completely destroyed his relationship with Clint because he couldn't resist the urge to kiss him. He should have more self control than this! What sort of fucking idiot was he? If he'd just stayed professional... Well, it was too late for that. *Way* too late. He'd left professional behind a *long* time ago. Like, maybe the first time he'd jerked off while thinking of Clint. God, he was so fucked.

"Ah – I – this isn't –" he stammered, trying desperately to think of some way to explain this compromising position. Trying to think of some way to salvage this.

"Did you just kiss me?" Clint asked, staring up at Phil, confusion and shock in his expression. God, Phil felt like shooting himself right now.

"No," he answered quickly. He didn't sound at all convincing, going by Clint's expression.

"You did!" Clint exclaimed, still staring at Phil incredulously.

Shit. He was going to start yelling now, wasn't he? Phil would just have to take the punches as they came. He deserved them, after all. He really hoped Clint didn't break anything. He'd only just recently gotten out of medical, after all.

Phil was so caught up in his own thoughts, that he almost missed what Clint said next. The archer's voice was uncharacteristically soft and even if Phil had been listening closely, he probably wouldn't have been able to make out half of what Clint said, he was speaking so softly. However, the few tones that Phil did catch made him falter slightly. Clint's voice sounded...nervous. Shy, almost. He'd never before associated the word "shy" with Clint Barton.

"Sorry, I didn't catch what you said," Phil said, feeling anxious himself about the answer.

"I, ah, asked you if you like me," Clint replied, not meeting Phil's eyes, and Phil could see a light dusting of pink across Clint's cheeks. "You know. *Like* like. Romantically."

"Oh," Phil said, taken off guard. He wasn't sure what to say to that. He'd expected a much more violent reaction, not this shy, tentative question. Was he supposed to say yes? Or no? Would it be worse if he said yes? Would Clint think he was some sort of creepy old man? A stalker?

Phil sucked in a deep breath. Well, there was really only one way he could go, then. He might as well tell the truth. He'd already completely destroyed their friendship anyway, so telling Clint about his epic crush on him couldn't make the situation any worse. Probably. Maybe Clint would even find it flattering – more so than if Phil was just a sex maniac, at least. Here goes nothing.

"Yes. I am...romantically attracted to you," Phil replied, fiddling with the cuffs on his dress shirt and not daring to see Clint's reaction. "I have been for quite a while."

"Are you in love with me?" Clint asked softly, and Phil couldn't help but look at him, startled to see what looked like *hope* in Clint's eyes.

"I am in love with you," Phil admitted, just as softly.

Phil's increasingly melancholy thoughts were interrupted by – by *laughter*. Clint was laughing! Fuck, was he really that pathetic? ...but no, the tone sounded different than that. It wasn't mocking or bitter, it was more...*incredulous*. Happy. Hopeful. Amazed. What was going on here?

"You love me," Clint repeated, still lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, as if looking at Phil was too overwhelming for him right now. "You bastard. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

This was...not what Phil had been expecting. Well, the "you bastard" part was, but certainly not the "why didn't you tell me sooner" bit. He really wasn't prepared for this. Normally he worked best in very stressful situations, calmly compartmentalizing and giving out instructions, but all of that seemed to go out the window when Clint was involved. Or, at least, when it came to his feelings for Clint. Like right now.

"You know, this would have been handy to know seven years ago," Clint continued, bringing Phil back down to earth. "Or, well, any time within the past seven years. It would have saved me a lot of tears. Okay, maybe it wouldn't have. I've only ever cried over you once."

"You've cried over me?" Phil said, dazed.

“Bogota,” Clint replied softly. “When you dropped me off at the safe house and then left. I cried because I wanted you to be there with me. I thought I was dying, and I wanted you to be the last thing I saw. I’m kind of pathetic.”

“Clint, you’re *not* pathetic,” Phil said sternly, but caringly. “I’m the pathetic one. I’ve been in love with you for five whole years.”

“Was that supposed to cheer me up?” Clint laughed. “Because I’ve been in love with you for seven.”

“You’re in love with me,” Phil repeated numbly. “For seven years?”

“Yes, Captain Obvious,” Clint said, turning to smile at Phil wryly. “Seven years. I win.”

“Well, now that we know that you’re more pathetic than I am...” Phil said, humor in his tone.

“Shut up,” Clint grumbled, his voice fond. “You’re nearly as pathetic. And it’s not my fault you’re hard to read. I thought you liked John.”

“You thought I liked your brother?” Phil asked, surprised. “Why would you think that?”

“Besides the fact that you two are *perfect* for each other?” Clint said, giving Phil a look that clearly said ‘duh.’

“He’s not my type,” Phil shrugged. “Too sweet.”

“Hey!” Clint yelped, pouting at Phil. “Are you saying I’m not sweet?”

“Of course not,” Phil said, trying to suppress a grin. “You’re very sweet. Just not in the traditional sense. Your hobbies are also much less creepy than your brother’s.”

“My hobbies include climbing up the sides of skyscrapers and eavesdropping on people from air vents,” Clint said disbelievingly. “I fail to see how those are any less creepy than my brother’s.”

“Your brother chases down criminals vigilante style in his spare time and puts up with a flat mate that keeps severed heads in the refrigerator,” Phil replied. “Your hobbies are much saner. Plus, I think John and I are too alike to ever form a bond that close. I need someone a little...different.”

“Well, I’m very different,” Clint answered, smiling up at Phil from where he was still lying on the bed. “Not necessarily in a good way, but I promise to keep your life interesting.”

“Don’t worry,” Phil laughed. “You’ve been keeping my life interesting for seven years. I don’t think that that’s going to stop any time soon. Or ever, for that matter.”

“I should hope not!” Clint scoffed exaggeratedly, grinning.

Phil smiled, although internally he was still reeling in shock. This was not what he had been expecting at all. This was beyond all of his wildest dreams. Admittedly, in his wildest dreams they typically never got to the part where they started talking about their relationship, but in some of the more demure ones, Clint always said that he hadn’t thought of Phil in that way before but was willing to try a relationship. Phil had never imagined that it was possible for Clint to have been in love with him longer than he’d been in love with Clint. Just thinking about it blew his mind all over again.

How was this man *real*? And what had Phil ever done to deserve him? The whole situation was baffling. In a good way, of course. Clint was *his*. And wouldn't that take some time to get used to. He'd spent so long convincing himself that Clint would *never* be his that this whole conversation had a decidedly surreal quality. Maybe he was just dreaming. Clint was so far out of his league that to think that he'd actually like Phil back...

"Kiss me."

Phil refocused on Clint, blinking. Had he heard correctly? It was one thing to feel romantically for someone like him, but did Clint really want to kiss a balding man a good ten years older than himself?

"Um, well, I get it if you don't want to kiss me," Clint said quickly, and Phil could literally hear him backtracking, hiding back in his shell. "I mean, I'm no Captain America, but I'd really like it if you would kiss me."

At this, Phil let out a breathy, incredulous laugh.

"God, you're gorgeous," he told the archer. "You're completely gorgeous. I have no idea why you're worried about whether a bland, balding, older man wants to kiss you, but I'd be happy to oblige you."

With that, he leaned down and covered Clint's lips with his own. This kiss was almost painfully gentle. The warm wetness of Clint's mouth drew him in, soft and slow. Not deep or passionate, but nice. Romantic, perhaps. Hot, certainly. Phil braced his hands on either side of Clint's head, moving fully onto the bed, his knees bracketing Clint's hips. Clint's hands reached up to grasp at the front of Phil's shirt, pulling him closer. The kiss steadily grew more intense, a flick of Phil's tongue eliciting a whimper from Clint.

Phil would have been completely content to keep on like that forever, but he was quickly running out of breath. He broke away from Clint to take in a lungful of air, glancing down at Clint, sprawled out on the bed blissfully, eyes dark. Phil had to blink to make sure that this wasn't just another dream. Clint was still there when he opened his eyes, however the serene expression on his face had faded, his jaw clenched in discomfort.

"Clint, are you –" Phil began, bringing his hand up to stroke Clint's cheek, however he drew his hand back sharply, blue sparks shooting up from where he had touched Clint.

More sparks danced across Clint's skin, down his arms and across his chest, his hair sizzling with them. Phil began to panic, however he quickly noticed that while Clint looked uncomfortable, he didn't look like he was in any pain. In fact, he seemed to relax more the longer the sparks sizzled up from his skin. The slightly paler than normal pallor his skin had taken on since being captured by Loki was returning to its natural color, and the dark circles under his eyes were quickly fading. He looked more and more alive and far less tired with every passing moment.

Finally, the sparking stopped. Clint took in a deep breath, closing his eyes and then reopening them, his eyes bright with energy once again. He pushed himself up onto his forearms, dragging Phil back into a kiss, this one far rougher and deeper than the previous one. Phil felt Clint's tongue against his lips, coaxing them open, pushing back into Phil's mouth, wet and hot. After a few moments, Clint's tongue slipped away and the archer collapsed back onto the bed, completely lax and content.

"I think you just broke the spell, Prince Charming," Clint said, once he'd caught his breath.

“Is that what that was?” Phil asked, body still positioned above Clint’s, his eyes raking over Clint’s form, checking for any residual blue sparks. “I thought it was getting worse.”

“Nope,” Clint replied, smiling. “I’m feeling great now, actually. Much more energetic.”

“Well, Sleeping Beauty, I still would prefer it if you had Bruce check you over before we jump to any conclusions,” Phil said, concern in his voice, his hand moving to run through Clint’s hair soothingly.

“Oh, fine,” Clint conceded unhappily, pouting at Phil. “But you’re going to have to get off of me first.”

Phil laughed and moved off the bed, straightening out the wrinkles in his suit as he watched Clint sit up, the other agent infusing as much sarcasm as possible into the action, clearly communicating that he’d rather stay in the bed. Well, Phil would prefer that too, but he thought that it would probably be better for their relationship in the long run if Clint didn’t die because they didn’t pay close enough attention to the magical blue sparks coming off of him.

Once Clint had gotten up off the bed and finished stretching, Phil started walking towards the door, pausing only momentarily in surprise as he felt Clint’s hand wrap around his, intertwining their fingers. Phil smiled to himself, squeezing Clint’s hand, feeling a giddy happiness well up in his chest. They walked down the hallway and out the door of Clint’s apartment until they got to the elevator.

Phil stopped and blinked, wondering if he was seeing things correctly. Next to him, Clint burst out laughing, clinging to Phil’s arm to keep from falling down. Taped to the elevator door was a sign:

Out of order until you two idiots have sex. Love, Tony, Jason, Aaron, and Natasha

Natasha’s name had actually been scribbled out, and below it was written: This was not my idea. You *are* trapped, though, so I would suggest making use of the time you have.

Phil felt his face heat up as he read the note, although Clint continued to laugh.

“So, do you think we should take their advice?” Clint asked once he had managed to control his laughter, looking up at Phil and batting his eyelashes. “Because I *really* wouldn’t mind that.”

Phil let himself be led back to the bedroom.

William James was having a pretty nice day, all things considered. It was Thanksgiving Day and it was nice to be with all of his brothers again, considering it hadn’t actually happened in a while, due to the fact that he was always in a warzone. Of course, he would have preferred to be back over in Afghanistan if it meant that there weren’t a bunch of sickos trying to kidnap his brother so that they could gouge out his eyes. Knowing that your brother was in danger of being shot by an enemy spy was one thing, but knowing that someone was trying to brainwash a maim Clint... that was harder. Neither were *easy* but William was pretty sure that Clint would go crazy without his eyes.

Of course, William knew that his brothers worried about what would happen if he was captured over in Afghanistan, too, but all of this magic made things even worse. Humans were terrifying, but magic was on a whole nother scale. William hadn’t actually seen any in person, and, honestly, he

wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to. It was a strange thought for him, considering he *lived* off of danger. He literally couldn't get enough of it. But somehow magic was different. He'd thought about it a lot, and at first he'd thought that maybe it was because Loki had come so close to killing Clint with it. But it couldn't be that. He'd thought that Aaron had been killed by a roadside bomb, however instead of being terrified of bombs, he'd actively gone after them.

A shiver ran down his spine – half trepidation, half exhilaration. Just hearing James describe the situation with Clint over the phone, demanding that he give instructions on how to disarm a bomb, sent a chill through him on the other end of the line. The fear of magic hadn't actually set in until after he was already on the plane ride over to the states. During the frantic phone call it'd been pure adrenaline. The rush was gone now.

“Hey, William, come help out in the kitchen!” William heard Aaron yell from the other room, breaking him out of his thoughts. “We need more people in here to help us restrain Jason!”

“Hey!” Jason protested, annoyed. “It's not my fault that you guys can't taste anything!”

“No, I think it's the other way around, Jason,” William shot back, grinning as he ambled on into the kitchen, taking in a deep breath as the scents of all of the dishes being cooked wafted through the air. “Smells good. What're you guys cooking right now?”

“Will's trying out a new turkey recipe, something fancy with rosemary,” Brian said, waving a hand at one end of the counter where Will was mixing olive oil, rosemary, and a few other ingredients together, Ethan hovering nearby and handing him the ingredients he requested. “Marta's making some sort of vegetable – asparagus, I think – ”

Brian stuck his tongue out in mock disgust at this, causing William to laugh.

“ – and she's convinced Aaron to join the Dark Side. He's making a salad,” Brian said, dropping his voice conspiratorially.

“Oh yes, you wouldn't actually want to eat anything *healthy*,” Jim said from where he was chopping sweet potatoes next to Brian, a grin on his face. “I'm pretty sure that Thanksgiving is the only time of the year that you actually eat any vegetables.”

“According to congress, the tomato sauce on pizza counts as a vegetable,” Brian shot back, smirking at his friend.

“Sorry to break it to you, Bri, but tomatoes are fruits,” William said, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

“Not according to the US government,” Brian argued, pointing at him with the wooden spoon he was using to scoop the mashed potatoes.

William laughed and dropped the argument, rolling his eyes at his brother.

“Anyway, what's everybody else making? I need something to do right now,” William said, scanning the kitchen where everybody was hard at work. Well, except for Clint and Phil, but they had yet to emerge from Clint's apartment. “Any of the cute chicks need help with anything?”

“You're crazy, man, calling them 'chicks.' They'll cut off your balls and eat them for breakfast,” Brian laughed, glancing over at Natasha, Jane, Casey, and Marta, “and there's no fucking way

Aaron's gonna let you anywhere near Marta when you're talking like that. Also, Jason said something about Casey having a highflying lawyer boyfriend, so you're not gonna get much farther there. Natasha, Casey, and Thor are all making bread rolls, and if you're into girls who will kill you after mating you can try for Natasha."

"Jeez, you guys need to find some girls who aren't so fucking scary," William sighed, looking at Natasha in disappointment. "Wait – she's the one who nearly killed James, isn't she? Goddamn."

"You could see about Jane," Brian shrugged. "She's over making cranberry sauce. Although, Will was telling me yesterday that she has a pretty mean right hook."

"You know, I think I'll pick up a cute chick somewhere else," William said, looking disgruntled. "What are the guys making?"

"Well, like I told you earlier, Will and Ethan are making the turkey," Brian started, motioning to the two IMF agents again. "John and his boyfriend are making some sort of squash soup. Butternut squash or something like that. Jimbo's making some roasted sweet potatoes. James and his geek are making the cornbread chorizo stuffing. Bruce and Benji are cooking up some sort of maple syrup carrots using all of that syrup left over from when Jason made his pancakes, and Steve and Tony are making pumpkin pie for dessert. Although I think they're making apple pie too, which is kind of hilarious, considering it's *Captain America*."

"What about Jason?" William asked with some trepidation, looking around for his other brother.

"He's setting the table," Brian replied, waving the mashed potato spoon towards the dining room. "He's not allowed to touch any of the food, so he's stuck washing dishes. Oh, and Clint and Phil are still up in his apartment."

A suggestive grin spread over Brian's face as he said this. God, what was his brother up to this time?

"What have you done now, idiot?" William asked, checking the clock. It was already eleven o'clock. There was no way Clint and his friend were still sleeping.

"Me? *I* didn't do anything, but some other people might have told them to get their act together and fuck already," Brian answered, looking far too pleased with the situation.

"Wait, they weren't already fucking?" William asked, surprised. "Also, Bri, you have no right to criticize them about not 'getting their act together.' You still haven't fucked Jim, have you?"

"Shut the fuck up," Brian hissed, voice low. "Keep your fucking voice down!"

"Dude, I've heard more about Jim in the past two days than I've heard about all of the girls you've been with in the past *year*," William said, not lowering his voice. "I'm not telling you to write a love poem, just tell the guy you like him."

"What the fuck ever," Brian muttered, focusing on the mashed potatoes. "I'll tell him eventually."

"Bri, if you take any longer you'll be pining longer than *Clint*," William pointed out. "And, I mean, it's not like the guy's gonna tell you no. He's enamored with you."

“Since when do you use words like ‘enamored’?” Brian asked, snark dripping from his voice. “And I really don’t think that that word means what you think it means. ‘cause Jim is *not* enamored with me. We’re friends.”

“You honestly buy that shit that his girlfriend broke up with him because he got kicked off the SWAT team? There’s no way that was the real reason,” William scoffed. “And you guys practically live in each other’s pockets. He wouldn’t put up with your moods if he wasn’t in love with you.”

“Whatever,” Brian said, not looking at William. “This conversation is over, okay? Good.”

William rolled his eyes.

The entire Barton family was currently seated at the dining room table – all twenty two of them. They had a veritable feast set out in front of them, turkey, potatoes, asparagus, pie, and so much more. As much as Clint loved his brothers, he had to admit that the food was definitely one of his favorite parts of the Thanksgiving holiday. He was pretty sure that he ate at least twice his weight in food every year. John always tried to tell him that that was physically impossible when he said it, but Clint was pretty sure that he had a superhuman stomach. That was his superpower.

Of course, there was always a lot of boisterous conversation, too, and, like Clint had expected, his brothers showed no mercy in their teasing about him and Phil. Neither did his teammates for that matter, not counting Steve. Trust the one time Bruce enjoyed a joke to be the time it was at Clint’s expense. Bruce could be kind of a troll, though, so Clint supposed he really should have expected it.

Well, it probably would have also helped if he and Phil had emerged from his apartment before noon. He’d gotten a lot of comments about making up for those seven years of pining. Even Will had made a subtle joke, which totally was not fair. He had no right to talk, what with the whole Ethan Hunt thing. Of course, Clint suspected that Will hadn’t completely noticed the fact that Ethan was trying to woo him, and, knowing his brother, Will probably hadn’t even realized that he had a crush on Ethan yet. He had an unfortunate habit of going “oh, look at that super attractive guy” only to be distracted by “oh, look at all that important paperwork.” At least Clint had *known* that he was attracted to Phil.

Which, admittedly, wasn’t much better, but he and Phil were together now, so that really didn’t matter anymore. Although that morning after some really fantastic shower sex, Clint had really wanted to hit himself over the head for not initiating something sooner. They could have been doing this for *years*!

“You know what, I propose a toast!” Tony Stark’s voice called out from across the table, causing Clint to look up from his turkey. What was Tony doing now? “I propose a toast: to meeting new, highly unstable, people. To scraping by another year without dying. Barely. To saving the world from genius and utter stupidity. And to finally getting you act together after seven long, painful to watch years. I was going to write ‘Congratulations on the Sex’ on your pie, but Steve vetoed it. Sorry guys.”

“Cheers,” everyone chorused once Tony sat down, some more enthusiastically than others. Brian seemed to be warming up to Tony more and more every day, which Clint wasn’t so sure was a good thing. Something must have happened since the Scrabble game the other day, because before it really didn’t seem like they liked each other very much.

Clint was distracted from his thoughts again by the feeling of Phil's warm hand on his thigh under the table. Clint smiled, looking over at his...boyfriend? Lover? Partner? Partner sounded the most appropriate. Clint had always dreaded becoming one of those lovey dovey people who suddenly became an utter sap whenever their spouse was mentioned, but he could already see himself falling into that pattern with Phil. It was just so *easy* with Phil, to become so sentimental.

The problem was, Clint couldn't actually bring himself to care. He'd always imaged, when he let himself, that if he ever got together with Phil that he'd have to keep it a secret, that he'd have to sneak around behind SHIELD's back and that no one could *ever* know. Within only hours of becoming Phil's partner, his entire family and twelve other people already knew. And Phil seemed entirely unconcerned about this. Phil wasn't ashamed of being with him, he wasn't shy about it. He didn't care if it would affect the opinions of his coworkers, or anyone for that matter. Clint had no clue what he'd done to deserve this man.

"You okay?" Clint heard Phil ask, bringing him back down to earth.

"Yeah. I'm feeling amazing, actually," he said, leaning against Phil, their chairs pushed so close together that they might as well have been sitting on a bench instead of two chairs.

"Good," Phil replied, smiling, glancing back at his dinner. "Are you done with your dinner already?"

"Clint? Done with dinner so soon?" Aaron exclaimed teasingly, looking over at his brother. "Quick! Get him to the hospital! He must have something serious!"

"I'm just *pacing* myself," Clint responded, sticking his tongue out at his brother, not caring if it was immature. He was just with family. "Unlike *some* people. Remember that time at the state fair that you ate so much cotton candy in half an hour that you got sick?"

"Oooh, that was a low blow," Aaron said, mock hurt in his voice.

Clint laughed.

"You know, I feel like we're missing something," Brian said suddenly, looking at the table. "Something vitally important..."

"Hmmm...well, there's –" Jim's eyes lit up in realization. "The mashed potatoes! Did you get them out of the oven, Bri?"

"Shit," Brian said, a little sheepish. "Uh, well, I might have just left them on the counter..."

"Here, let's go check and make sure that we haven't started burning down the entire tower," Jim suggested, setting his napkin on the table and standing up, walking towards the kitchen.

"Don't take *too* long," William called after them, Brian shooting him a glare before he disappeared into the kitchen with Jim. Clint had no clue what that was supposed to be about, but it seemed like some sort of inside joke between the two.

"What was that about?" John asked, looking over at William, suspicion in his expression.

"Nothing," William replied, trying for innocent; however it came across as more deviant than innocent.

“You know that now you *have* to tell us,” Jason said, an amused half smile on his face. “There’s no way you’re going to get away with just saying ‘nothing.’”

“I was just telling Brian that now that Clint’s finally gotten his act together that he’ll claim the title of ‘Longest Time Pining After Someone’ for the Barton family,” William replied, smirking.

“It was just seven years!” Clint protested, although his argument sounded weak even to his own ears. “Anyway, I’m out of the running now.”

“Unless your record holds,” Will quipped, swallowing another bite of asparagus. “Which it probably will.”

“You know, speaking of record holding, you had a chance to break Clint’s other record, Will, but you let it pass you by!” Aaron said, mild disappointment in his voice.

“Which record?” Will asked, pretending to be confused, although his tone suggested that he clearly knew which one Aaron was talking about.

“Tallest Building Climbed by a Barton Brother,” Aaron replied. “None of us have gotten a chance to climb the Burj Khalifa yet.”

“Yeah, well, there was no way I was trusting those stupid glue gloves,” Will said defensively, frowning. “It’s a good thing, too, considering that Ethan almost fell because they started malfunctioning. I’d rather not have to go through that.”

“Wait, you *knew* that you wouldn’t work, but you let me go anyway?” Ethan asked, incredulous.

“No, I didn’t *know*,” Will replied, although he looked a little guilty. “I just...suspected, considering they’re HammerTech.”

“Right back at you mate – never trust HammerTech,” Benji said, nodding his head solemnly. “I swear, all of their tech only has a fifty/fifty chance of working.”

“Both of you knew?” Ethan exclaimed, almost pouting. “That’s unfair. I could have died.”

“But look! You didn’t!” Benji said, smiling. “Will and Jane caught you.”

“Why do I feel like I’ve had a similar conversation before?” Will muttered under his breath, glaring at Benji.

“What are these records you guys are talking about?” Casey interrupted, looking confused. “Some sort of family tradition?”

“Kind of,” Will answered, clearing his throat with a sip of water before continuing. “I think it started out as us trying to compare who had the craziest job, and then it devolved from there.”

“Yeah, for example, I hold the record for tallest building climbed, after a mission of mine a few years ago involved me climbing up the side of the Taipei 101 in Taiwan, the third tallest building in the world,” Clint explained, pausing to munch on a bread roll. “Aaron holds the record for evading capture the most time, what with the CIA always after him.”

“I’m not sure that I really like the fact that we have that record,” Aaron grumbled. “What does it say about how often people attempt to kidnap us? And what about how often they *succeed*?”

“Well, you also hold the Polar Bear record,” Clint shrugged.

“Polar Bear record?” Bruce asked, confused.

“It means that he was crazy enough to go for a swim in northern Alaska in January. He wasn’t even wearing a wetsuit,” John replied, giving his brother ha ‘what were you thinking?’ look. Aaron just shot him a lopsided grin.

“So basically it’s just a way of proving that you’re all insane,” Quillan summarized, looking unimpressed.

“Oh, but you already knew that,” James said, a small smirk on his lips as he looked over at Q. “Why, does this scare you? You do know that insanity is practically a requirement in our line of work.”

“Of course I knew that,” Quillan replied, his face growing hot. “It’s just that I don’t normally hear operatives admitting to it.”

“Well, then it looks like you still have quite a bit to learn, cub,” James answered, looking quite amused.

“Could you please not call me that?” Q said, annoyed. “I am plenty old enough.”

“Of course you are,” James replied, with the tone of an older person humoring a small child’s fantasies. Quillan was quite tempted to kick him under the table.

Clint was trying not to laugh. He was pretty sure that Phil could feel him shaking from the trapped laughter, though, considering how closely together they were pressed. Not that he seemed to mind. Clint was having a great time. This is what he really loved, all the banter with his brothers. It was always so much fun to watch.

Clint opened his mouth to make a comment of his own; however he froze as he felt something cold, yet soft, press against the back of his neck. Icy fingers trailed down his spine and his breath caught in his throat. He heard the conversation abruptly cease as everyone turned to stare at whoever was behind him. Clint already knew who it was.

“Well, well, look at this turnout!” Loki said, amusement in his tone and his fingers continued to caress the back of Clint’s neck, blue energy sparking off his fingertips. “It’s certainly a much larger audience than last time, isn’t it little hawk?”

“Get your hands off me,” Clint choked out, his body tensing in unexpected fear. Why was Loki able to wield such power over him? It frustrated him to no end.

“I don’t think I will, pet,” Loki replied, running his fingers through the hair at the nape of Clint’s neck, his nails scraping over Clint’s scalp, emphasizing his point.

“Let him go,” Jason demanded, causing Clint to glance over at him to see that he already had his gun trained on Loki. “Let him go right now.”

“You know, I would suggest dropping the gun if you don’t want me to kill your brother right here and now,” Loki said calmly, barely even glancing at Jason. “Wouldn’t that be a shame...”

Clint could see Jason's jaw clench, his knuckles white around the handle of the gun as his grip tightened. However, Casey, who was sitting next to him, leaned over, saying something to him in tones too low for Clint to make out. Her eyes betrayed nothing, although Jason's flickered in indecision and perhaps regret before he conceded and lowered the gun. There was no defeat in his expression, though.

"Now, I am going to disappear with birdie, here," Loki said slowly, mockingly. "And you are *not* going to follow me until I've left the building, understand?"

Clint felt another stab of fear hit his chest as he felt Loki's hand bury itself in his hair, grip tightening, before he jerked up sharply, pulling at Clint's hair painfully, forcing him up out of his chair. Clint grit his teeth and stood, trying to think of some way to get out of this horrible mess. So far he'd come up with nothing.

Loki started walking backwards, taking Clint along with him, Clint nearly stumbling over his chair. Going step after step away from his family –

But then, all of a sudden, Clint heard a loud bang behind him. The cold fingers in his hair loosened and then released him, falling away limply as he heard a loud thump follow the bang. Clint whirled around to see Loki collapsed on the floor and Brian standing behind him, holding a frying pan menacingly. Maybe it was the shock setting in, but Clint was quite certain that it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. So he started laughing.

"Jesus!" he heard Brian exclaim, his brother rushing forward to support him as he could already feel himself going limp. "Fuck, what the hell, Clint? What's so fucking funny?"

"You," Clint managed to gasp out in between his heaving laughter.

"Thanks, bro. Thanks," Brian replied, clearly not finding this situation nearly as funny as Clint was. "Just give me a fucking heart attack, why don't ya?"

Clint finally managed to control his laughter, bottling it up and taking in deep breaths in order to steady himself, closing his eyes for a moment. He opened them again as he felt another hand on his shoulder, looking up to see James, a flicker of concern in his older brother's eyes, as he methodically checked Clint for any injuries.

"I'm fine," Clint reassured him, shrugging the hand off of his shoulder. "He didn't actually do anything."

"He better not have," Brian hissed, kicking at the fallen villain in spite.

Clint finally looked over at Loki properly, slowly taking in the crumpled form sprawled out on the hardwood floor. Again, he felt a shiver pass through him as his eyes passed over Loki's icy hands and deathly pale face. Steve was kneeling on the floor next to him, checking his pulse, lips pressed into a grim line. Natasha and Jason were busy securing Loki's hands behind his back and Thor was giving instructions on how best to restrict his magic abilities. Tony was already on the phone to SHIELD, his voice tense and angry, demanding to know why they hadn't known Loki was in the area. Clint felt a little sorry for the poor guys on duty, considering Loki really was such a hard person to track, but, well, he couldn't deny that he was at least a little pissed at them, too. He supposed he kind of had a right to, though.

Clint suddenly felt arms wrap around his stomach, pulling him back into a cocoon of warmth. Clint relaxed into the comfort of Phil's body as he breathed in the smell of ink, paper, and chocolate. He wanted to stay like this forever. Safe.

"He's still alive," Steve said, breaking Clint out of his Phil induced daze. "He's just unconscious."

"I could fix that," Clint heard Natasha say, voice silky, soft, and absolutely deadly.

"No," Steve snapped, shooting Natasha a hard look. "We're taking him into SHIELD."

Natasha pursed her lips, clearly unhappy, however she made no move to stop him and she made no further comments. She merely crossover her arms over her chest and stood over Loki, body tense, muscles coiled and ready to spring should Loki show even the slightest hint of movement.

"Okay, kiddies, it looks like Fury wants Natasha and Thor to ship Loki over to them, pronto," Tony announced, slipping his StarkPhone back into his pocket. "I, personally, agree. I want him out of my house as soon as physically possible. Or, you know, as soon as not physically possible. I pretty sure we can manage that with all the 'super' pent up in this room."

Thor nodded, hefting Loki up onto his shoulder. He and Natasha took off, walking briskly and bypassing the elevator in favor of the stairs, beginning the seventy some storey descent quickly, wasting no time. Clint closed his eyes, leaning back into Phil and listening to their footsteps growing quieter and quieter.

"You okay?" Phil asked softly, nearly a whisper, his lips brushing across the skin just below Clint's right ear.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Great, actually," Clint replied, the smallest of smiles tugging at his lips.

"Good."

Everyone was gathered in the living room. They had already finished up dinner after the unexpected interruption and after washing and drying all the dishes they were all feeling pretty tired. Which may or may not have had at least a little bit to do with the playful fight that had broken out after Brian decided that it would be funny to smear soap bubbles in Will's hair when he had turned his back to put some glasses back in the cupboard. Clint honestly didn't know why he even bothered with trying to keep those two from annoying each other anymore. They got along in their own special way, and Clint supposed that being utterly infuriating was a trait that all siblings shared. It just seemed that whenever something happened, Brian and Will were always pointing fingers at each other. It was amazing how Will seemed to throw his maturity to the wind whenever Brian was involved.

Clint was happy, though. The soap bubble fight that had broken out was actually pretty fun. Clint certainly hadn't expected Phil to shove a handful of soap bubbles down the back of his shirt. (He'd retaliated, of course, and it was probably a good thing that it was just soap, because otherwise Phil's dress shirt would be ruined.)

Jason, Brian, William, Jim, and Tony had all teamed up on James and ambushed him, however he'd somehow managed to escape them... only to be hit in the face by a handful of soap bubbles from Quillan. Clint had laughed himself sick at the shocked expression on James' face and Brian and

Jason declared that Quillan was officially their protégé. Which, admittedly, Q didn't seem all that thrilled about, but the MI6 agent had looked like the cat that'd caught the canary when James had glared at him.

Bruce and Sherlock had tried to stay out of the chaos, talking quietly in the corner of the kitchen, however John had run over and smeared a streak of soap across Sherlock's cheek, which had led to the detective chasing John around the kitchen until he finally managed to get some all along the back of John's neck. Tony had, naturally, snuck up on Bruce and done pretty much the same thing, except that Bruce had just rolled his eyes and refused to participate.

Will and Ethan had teamed up and were at a stalemate against Brian and a somewhat reluctant Jim, while Jane and Benji took on Jason and Casey. Casey had rolled her eyes at first, but Clint was pretty sure he heard her slightly winded laughter at some point during the fight.

Meanwhile, Thor had overenthusiastically dumped a whole bowl of soapy water over a bewildered Steve's head, while Natasha looked on in amusement, only to nearly jump out of her skin as she felt Clint's soapy hands on her bright red hair. Phil had aimed his own handful of soap bubbles at her, only to have the Russian assassin dodge at the last moment, so that Marta got soap splattered across her shirt. Aaron had started laughing, which led to her wiping some of the soap off of her and shoving it down the front of Aaron's shirt. William had joined in by stuffing soap down the back of Aaron's shirt, high fiving Marta afterwards.

Once they'd run out of both soap bubbles and energy, John had suggested that they all change into pajamas and come back down to the living room to watch another movie before bed. That was where Clint found himself currently, pressed up against Phil on a soft, plush couch, Natasha on his other side and Bruce next to her. Clint was staying mostly silent as the others tried to think of a movie to watch, as he hadn't really seen many movies – or, at least, none that really seemed to be family appropriate. Not that they had any small children with them, nor conservative grandparents. Well, not counting Steve.

"Hey, what about Harry Potter?" Brian said suddenly, bouncing in his seat, still energized from earlier.

"Harry Potter? Hasn't everyone already seen that?" Jim asked, looking over at Brian, who was sitting next to him.

"Clint hasn't," Brian replied. "Remember, Clint? We were talking about it just a few days ago. You didn't know who Hermione was."

"I think that that is practically a sin against humanity," Benji proclaimed, looking at Clint in what might be awe. "You can't not know Harry Potter. It's *essential* to everyday life!"

"I haven't seen it," Steve confessed, adjusting his sitting position, grabbing another cushion off of one of the couches to pad the nest he'd made for himself on the floor. The nest which Tony kept stealing parts of.

"*Thor* has seen Harry Potter," Tony said, looking over at Steve in shock. Steve glared at him.

"It's decided then – we're watching Harry Potter," Brian proclaimed, grabbing the remote from Jim who cuffed him on the head lightly in retaliation. "All eight movies, if possible. None of us fly out until Saturday, so we should be fine. You can recuperate on Friday."

Brian was about to press play, when JARVIS spoke, startling many of the people who still weren't quite used to the omnipotent voice emanating from the ceiling.

"Detective Walsh, there is a young woman here who wishes to see you," the AI said politely. "Her name is Allison Beaumont. Should I send her up?"

Clint's eyes flickered over to where Brian was sprawled out on one of the three couches next to Casey, noticing how he tensed up, surprised and perhaps a little nervous. They'd all heard a lot about Allison, but Clint had thought that she was busy over Thanksgiving. That's what Jason had said, at least. What was she doing here? Well, Jason clearly hadn't been expecting her. Was it because they actually *had* broken up?

"Yeah," Jason said after a moment, although he still looked a little conflicted. "She can come up. Did she say why she came over?"

"I'm afraid not, Detective," JARVIS replied, and Clint was still baffled at how Tony Stark had managed to make an AI that had the capacity to sound apologetic. Mind boggling.

"Oooh, so she actually *does* exist?" Brian said, grinning at his brother, flopping over onto Jim who grunted as Brian's weight came down on top of him, however he made no move to remove the other man.

"Yes, I did not just make her up," Jason answered with the air of someone who'd said this a million times already. "As shocking as that may be to you. Just because *you* don't have a girlfriend doesn't mean they don't exist."

Brian stuck his tongue out at Jason who rolled his eyes in response. A moment later, the elevator pinged. Jason heaved himself out of his chair, reluctance clear in his posture. He walked over to the elevator, shoulders tense as he waited for the doors to open. Clint craned his neck to see past Jason, taking in the sight of a pretty, dark haired woman standing in the elevator. The archer's sharp eyes took in her own body language, realizing that she was just as tense and reluctant as Jason. What sort of mess had Jason gotten himself into now?

"Hi," she said shortly, trying to force a smile onto her face, although everyone in the room could tell it was fake. Or at least mostly fake.

"Hi," Jason replied, just as reluctant as his girlfriend.

"I, ah, brought pie," she said, avoiding Jason's eyes and holding up a pie tin.

"Thanks," Jason said, making no move to take the pie.

"Look, Jason, I'm sorry, okay?" she sighed after a moment. "I really like you, and I know I haven't really been acting like it, but I do. And this is me trying to apologize for blowing off your Thanksgiving invitation. I know that this doesn't really fix much, but I was thinking that maybe we could call it a truce."

"I don't know..." Jason started, a little reluctantly, although Clint could detect a hint of devious humor underneath all the put upon tiredness in his voice. "What kind of pie is it?"

"Chocolate pumpkin," Allison answered, a smile spreading across her face.

“Okay, okay. You can come in,” Jason laughed, stepping aside to let her into the living room. “I get to try out all my new recipes on you next week, though.”

“Deal,” Allison said, leaning up to give Jason a quick kiss before stepping into the living room.

Clint heard Brian wolf whistle as Allison emerged from the elevator, stepping into the brighter light of the living room. She looked confused for a moment before her eyes landed on Brian. She blinked in surprise before deeming him harmless and moving onto the rest of the room. Smart woman. Clint thought that she was a person he could get to like.

“How’d you manage to get such a hot chick, Jason?” Brian asked, grinning at his brother.

“Unlike you, I’m not hanging off my best guy friend all the time,” Jason shot back, looking at Brian pointedly, drawing attention to the fact that he was currently half covering Jim as they lay on the couch. Brian just flipped him the bird.

“Anyway, guys, this is my girlfriend Allison Beaumont,” Jason said, turning away from Brian and motioning to Allison, presenting her to his brothers. “Allison, these are my brothers, James, John, Clint, Aaron, Brian, William, and Will. The other people are their friends, Quillan, Sherlock, Phil, Natasha, Tony, Steve, Thor, Bruce, Marta, Jim, Ethan, Jane, and Benji.”

“Nice to meet you guys,” Allison said, giving them a slightly nervous smile. “I know that Jason probably hasn’t said much about me, but – ”

“Are you kidding? He never shuts up about you!” Aaron laughed. “Seriously, it’s always ‘Allison this’ or ‘Allison that.’ It’s kind of adorable.”

“Oh,” she said, looking a little embarrassed. “In that case, I suppose I don’t need to introduce myself anymore.”

“Here, why don’t you put the pie in the fridge for a while,” John said, smiling kindly. “We were just about to watch the first Harry Potter movie, if you’d like to join us.”

“You don’t have anywhere you need to be, do you?” Jason asked, looking over at Allison.

“I called in sick,” Allison admitted, a little guiltily. “They should be fine, though. Banks and Delahoy can handle themselves for the most part. They have Cole to keep them on task, too.”

“Sounds okay, then,” Jason said. “Here, the kitchen’s this way.”

Clint smiled as he watched Jason lead Allison over to the kitchen. He had to admit, they were a pretty cute couple. He’d have to get to know Allison a little better before he could make an official judgment, but she seemed nice enough. Of course, Clint wasn’t always the best judge of character, but he had a pretty good feeling about this one. She made Jason happy, so that’s all that mattered, right? Of course, whenever Clint said that to Natasha, she always replied with “Chocolate makes you happy, but it also makes you fat.” He could say the same thing about Russian tea cakes, but he knew that that wouldn’t go over too well with Natasha. Still, life had to work out like a fairytale at least some of the time, didn’t it?

Well, Disney fairytales. He *knew* that it could end up like Grimm’s fairytales, but he wouldn’t dwell on that right now.

Clint jumped slightly as he felt Phil's hand suddenly snake around his waist, pulling him in closer to his boyfriend's warm body. Okay, so maybe he *did* actually have some proof that fairytale endings were possible. Or something like them, at least. Not that he was the sort of sappy person who compared his life to a fairytale or romance novel. Maria Hill was the one who read the romance novels. He'd found her stash two months ago.

Just then, Jason and Allison reemerged from the kitchen, turning off the lights before they curled up on one of the couches together next to Aaron and Marta. Brian waited just until their bodies touched the couch before he pressed play and the movie began. Clint snuggled even closer to Phil, feeling completely relaxed in a way that he hadn't in what seemed like forever.

Utterly, completely safe.

Clint woke up at seven am on Saturday morning. He looked at his alarm clock blearily for a moment, wondering why he'd set it before remembering that he'd wanted to see James and John once more before they left to go back to England. He quietly slipped out of bed, grabbing his fluffy purple bathrobe – a gift from Natasha from a few years back – and quietly padding over to the elevator. He tried rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he stood in the elevator, waiting for it to arrive at communal floor where James and John were probably making breakfast at that moment.

As he stepped out of the elevator, he could already smell the toast and what was probably eggs that his brothers were busy cooking. Coffee, too. That smelled *really* good. Clint walked into the kitchen and was greeted by the sight of James at the stove, cooking what looked like scrambled eggs while an incredibly tired looking John sat in the breakfast nook, sipping a cup of tea. Sherlock sat next to him, typing on a laptop, while Quillan sat across from him, doing the exact same thing. Clint had to resist the urge to laugh as they both took a sip of tea at the same time. Well, Sherlock took a sip of tea – it looked like Q was drinking coffee instead. Of course, Clint had never been very good at differentiating between the two unless he actually tasted them.

William was there, too, and it was a moment before Clint remembered that he'd also be leaving for the airport with James and John, as he had to catch a flight back to Afghanistan. He was leaning up against John, clearly still tired, but looking happy enough. Clint cracked a smile. It wasn't often that he could describe William as 'tired looking' considering how much energy he normally had.

"Hey," Clint said, voice rough from sleep, sliding onto the breakfast nook bench on William's other side. "Good morning."

"For you maybe," William grumbled, taking another large gulp of coffee.

Clint chuckled and tried to steal a sip of his brother's coffee, but William apparently wasn't tired enough to let that happen. What a shame.

Clint was about to reluctantly get up to get his own coffee when Will walked into the kitchen, already dressed in a pristine white dress shirt and neat tie, his slacks unwrinkled. How he managed to look like that at seven in the morning, Clint didn't know. Okay, so maybe seven wasn't *that* early, but he'd hardly gotten any sleep the night before, considering they'd stayed up so late watching Harry Potter. Which, Clint had to admit, was pretty fucking awesome. Plus, now he could tease Will about being like Hermione.

“Hey, Will,” Clint said, trying his best to sound pathetic and worth pitying. “Could you pretty please get me a cup of coffee? Please?”

Will glanced at him and rolled his eyes, but he still got out two mugs from the cupboard. Clint grinned internally. He wondered if he could work the same magic on Phil...

Just then, Brian stumbled in, plopping down next to Clint, soon followed by Jason, who at least looked moderately awake, and Aaron who looked downright *chipper*. (Which totally was not fair.) James made no overt acknowledgement of their presences in the room, however, he did pull the egg carton back out of the refrigerator and add the rest of the eggs to another pan. Clint smiled. James was much sweeter than most people gave him credit for. Well, that and his brothers had him totally wrapped around their little fingers. Mostly. He still wasn't willing to let them win at 'sneak up on James.' Clint supposed he did have a reputation to uphold.

It was only a few more minutes before all f the Barton brothers were seated at the Avengers' breakfast nook, quietly eating their toast and scrambled eggs and just basking in each others' presences. This was how it was supposed to be, Clint thought. As much as he loved his friends, he needed just a little while with his brothers. Not much, just a little. This was perfect.

However, it seemed like much too short a time when John stood up, stretching before bringing his plate over to the dishwasher, James following close behind. Sherlock looked up from his laptop over to John, following his lead and standing up, shutting down his laptop. Quillan was only moments behind him and so was William. Soon they were all standing near the doorway.

“Okay, guys,” John started, smiling, but a little sadly. “We've got to head out now.”

Everyone else stood up and hugs were exchanged. Clint was the last to hug the two, giving James a brief but comfortable hug first before moving to give William a firm hug. Lastly he squeezed John tightly, not entirely wanting to let go.

“Hey, easy there,” John laughed, gently prying Clint off of him. “We'll be back next year, remember? Maybe even sooner if things work out.”

“I'm holding you to that,” Clint said, forcing a smile.

“We'll see you then,” James said, ruffling Clint's hair gently in that annoying way that he knew Clint didn't really like. It was strangely nice, now.

“Goodbye,” the rest of the brothers chorused, all trying to not let on about how sad they were to see the other three go.

But while Clint was sad, he couldn't help but smile as he watched three of his brothers disappear into the elevator. John was right: they'd all see each other next year. He'd be counting the days until then.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! It's finally over! I had a ton of fun writing this, and I hope you all enjoyed reading it! As for my next project, I'm going to start writing a Johnlock AU where John is a composer

and Sherlock is a violinist, so if any of you are Johnlock fans, keep a look out for when I start posting! Also, check out my sister's Clint-centric fic over on fanfiction.net here: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/8936461/1/We-Won-t-Allow-You-to-Be-Alone-Anymore>. It's super cute!

Again, thanks for your epic support! I appreciate it a lot!

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